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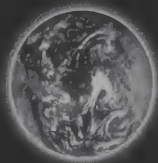
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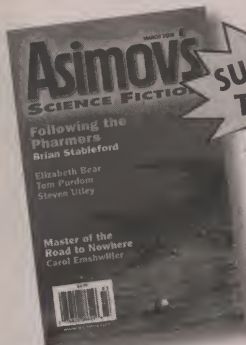
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MARCH 2012

Vol. 36 No. 3 (Whole Number 434)

Next Issue on Sale February 28, 2012

Cover Art by Stephen Hickman

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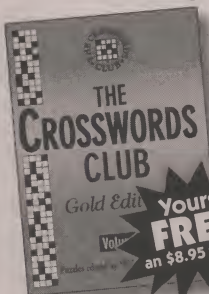
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Printed by Quad/Graphics, Taunton, MA U.S.A. (1/2/12)



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## WHOSE CANON?

In 2008, I participated in a panel discussion on an "SF Canon for Short Fiction" at the annual Armadillocon in Austin, Texas. We were asked to consider whether there are "short stories and novellas that we all should have read, or is there no required reading in this form?" The program book said further: "Our panelists will try to determine if there is a canon, and talk about what to add to it or what should be in it." Fortunately, no one tasked us with the job of whom to leave out of this imaginary canon.

Co-panelist Brad Denton wisely brought along a copy of *The Science Fiction Hall of Fame*, Vol., 1, which was edited by Robert Silverberg and published in 1970. This is a collection of stories that predated the establishment of the Nebula Awards and which the Science Fiction Writers of America selected by popular vote. With authors like Stanley G. Weinbaum, Robert A. Heinlein, Theodore Sturgeon, Isaac Asimov, A.E. van Vogt, Lewis Padgett (pseudonym of Henry Kuttner and C.L. Moore), Clifford D. Simak, Fredric Brown, Murray Leinster, Judith Merril, Cordwainer Smith, Ray Bradbury, C.M. Kornbluth, Arthur C. Clarke, Alfred Bester, Damon Knight, Daniel Keyes, and Roger Zelazny on its table of contents, it's an excellent book that does a pretty good job of representing a thirty-year period from 1934 to 1963. Those who are interested in the history of SF, any writers who don't want to reinvent the wheel, and anyone looking for a great book should certainly include it on their reading list.

As with any anthology, though, there are some major omissions. Works by Frederik Pohl, Poul Anderson, Jack Vance, and Jack Williamson eventually show up in volumes two and three. Stories by Andre Norton, Anne McCaffrey, Kathleen MacLean, Zenna Hernderson,

Kit Reed, Kate Wilhelm, and numerous other fine authors don't appear in any of the volumes.

Luckily, we were a verbose group and none of us were shy about suggesting who merited membership in this club. Merriam Webster's Dictionary defines a canon as "a: an authoritative list of books accepted as Holy Scripture b: the authentic works of a writer c: a sanctioned or accepted group or body of related works <the canon of great literature>." Science fiction is a young literature. It hasn't had the three hundred years that it took to collate the Christian Bible or the thousands of years that have contributed to the ossification of the "Western Literary Canon."

As we moved into the sixties, seventies, and later, our panel discussion mainly seemed to consist of each of us talking about lists of authors we enjoyed and then adding new ones as the next person's list reminded us of someone else. The conversation was chaotic, but fun, too, and I don't think we came within a million miles of constructing an SF canon. I don't want to turn this editorial into an inventory of contemporary authors, so I will resist naming names here, but we did come up with a huge roster of diverse and fascinating writers.

The urge to make lists of "the best SF authors, books, and stories" seems to be a compelling one. The need to jump all over these lists and dash the daylight out of them with a hammer seems to be equally strong. While these lists are omnipresent, most recently they seem to be popping up like critters in a Whac-A-Mole machine. Last spring and summer, two major news corporations joined the act by asking readers and listeners to help them come up with such lists. Sixty thousand NPR listeners winnowed a fi-

nalist list of 237 SF and fantasy books to a "Top 100 List" while readers of Great Britain's *The Guardian.com* contributed around five hundred suggestions to a list of "favourite science fiction books."

Both lists contain some wonderful reading material. Indeed, I envy the person who, because of these lists, will discover many of these books for the first time. Naturally, each list also contains quite a few works that have never impressed me or that I have not yet read. Alas, and perhaps unavoidably, each list also omits copious amounts of quality work from some of our field's most distinguished authors.

Neither list contains anything by Clifford D. Simak or Gregory Benford. Nothing by Octavia E. Butler, Robert Reed, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Nancy Kress, Neal Barrett, Jr., Karen Joy Fowler, Rudy Rucker, Suzy McKee Charnas, and other major contributors to *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine. I would not want either of these lists to define my own tastes in science fiction.

While the Venn Diagram of works that contributed to my development as an SF reader and that I would, or would not, have put on these lists differs markedly from what appears at either news outlet, I'm sure that your own diagram differs significantly from mine and from these lists as well.

Lists can be fun to draw up and fun to fight over, but there is a danger to them, too. They are exciting when they bring new works to our attention, but it's imperative that they not restrict our reading. We know that a professor preparing a semester's curriculum or an editor pulling together the table of contents for an SF survey anthology will encounter limits set by time and space. We can let their suggestions be guideposts if we want, but they only represent a sliver of the tremendous material available to all of us.

The SF canon will never be set in stone. The awesome responsibility for carving out a personal set of the "best science fiction" is up to each and every one of us, alone. ○

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## MY VOYAGE TO ATLANTIS

My the time you read this, I will have made a voyage to the lost continent of Atlantis—what's left of it, if it ever was there in the first place. If I unearth any relics of its ancient fabulous civilization while I'm there, I'll surely make that news known in a later column.

A voyage to Atlantis? What did you say, Silverberg?

Let me explain.

Atlantis has been a topic of speculation ever since about 355 B.C., when Plato, then in his seventies, composed a dialog called *Timaeus*. Its chief characters are Socrates and two friends, Timaeus and Critias. At one point Critias tells the story of the ancient, vanished island of Atlantis, which, he says, his great-grandfather Dropides had first heard from the great lawgiver Solon. Solon, Critias declares, learned about Atlantis from Egyptian priests of the city of Sais around 550 B.C. They had told him of the invasion of Athens, nine thousand years earlier, by a mighty army that had entered the Mediterranean from the Atlantic at the Pillars of Hercules, today known as the Strait of Gibraltar. These invaders came from an island called Atlantis, larger than Asia and Africa put together. (What Plato meant by "Asia" and "Africa" was what we know as Asia Minor and North Africa.)

The Atlantean warriors attempted to subdue Greece and Egypt, but were met and driven back by the Athenian army. "Then, O Solon," the Egyptians had said, "did the power of your city shine forth in all men's eyes, glorious in valor and strength." (Both Greece and Egypt as political entities were still far in the future, nine thousand years ago.) Not long after this great victory, "there occurred violent earthquakes and floods, and in a single day and night of rain . . . the island of Atlantis disappeared, and was sunk beneath the sea."

In a second dialog, *Critias*, Plato provided further details about the lost continent. It had been, he said, a place of high splendor, with soaring palaces and vast canals and majestic bridges. One temple, six hundred feet long and three hundred feet wide, was entirely covered by silver, and its roof was of gold. Its ceiling was fashioned from ivory inlaid with silver and gold. There were gardens, racecourses, parks, superb harbors thronged with ships, and wealth beyond measure. And all this had gone to the bottom of the sea in a single day and night.

Plato's Atlantis was fiction. His pupil Aristotle said of it, "He who invented it destroyed it." But the fable was a compelling one, and it survived the downfall of Greek culture. When European seamen began venturing into the Atlantic in the fifteenth century, there were frequent reports that the remnants of the lost continent had been sighted, and when they reached South and Central America and found the highly developed civilizations of the Aztecs, Incas, and Mayas, it was easy to conclude that these were descendants of refugees from that great land.

In the centuries that followed many a scholar, working from the assumption that Plato's story was no fable but veritable history, and that Atlantis was the region where mankind first rose from barbarism to civilization, propounded theories of where Atlantis had been, what had happened to it, and where the survivors of the great cataclysm had gone. Some said that Atlantis had been as far away as the vicinity of Brazil, but other students of the tale had different ideas. Among them was one Bory de Saint-Vincent, whose *Essai sur des Îles fortunées et l'antique Atlantide* of 1803 set forth the notion that Atlantis had been located just off the northwest corner of Africa, close by

the shore of what is now Morocco, and that after the earthquake and flood all that remained of it were the tips of its highest mountains, the present-day islands of Madeira, the Azores, and the Canaries, rising above the Atlantic like the masts of a sunken ship.

It does sound plausible, although modern-day geologists and climatologists have shown pretty conclusively that the islands could not have been formed that way, nor has undersea exploration in the area turned up any evidence of the ruined palaces and temples of vanished Atlantis. But one argument in favor of the Canary Islands theory that kept the idea alive for many decades was the verifiable presence in historic times of a genuine and mysterious lost race, a group of tall, dark-haired, blue-eyed folk who could have been the survivors of the destruction of Atlantis and—all Atlantean fantasies aside—might well have been the last vestige of the Cro-Magnon race that once dominated much of Western Europe.

They are known as the Guanches—a term derived from the words *Guan Chen-erfe*, which in their language meant "Son of Tenerife," Tenerife being one of the seven Canary Islands that lie just off the Moroccan shore. In fact they were found on the other six islands too, and each had its own name for them—Mahos, Bimbaches, Gomeros, etc. But it is as Guanches that we refer to the entire aboriginal population of the Canaries today.

They were a handsome race. A sixteenth-century account by the friar Alonso de Espinosa says of them, "This people had very good and perfect features, and well-shaped bodies. They were of tall stature, with proportionate limbs. . . . The people to the south are of rather a brown color, either from inheritance or from the hot climate, their skins being toasted by

the sun, as they go about nearly naked. But on the north side they are white, and the woman are beautiful and rosy, with long hair." Their clothes were made of the skins of animals; they farmed only barley and beans; each island had a king who presided over a court of nobles and knights. By the time Father Espinosa wrote of them they were virtually extinct, for the Spaniards had waged a war of conquest against them, island by island, from the first Spanish landing in 1417 to their final defeat in 1497, and most of the survivors were finished off by the diseases that the Spaniards had brought with them. A certain amount of inbreeding has probably perpetuated Guanche genes among the present-day population of the Canaries, but they are essentially a vanished race, as lost as . . . well, Atlantis.

One interesting thing about the Guanches is their physical resemblance to the Cro-Magnons who occupied Western Europe from about twenty-five thousand years B.C.E. onward, driving out the older Neanderthal race and leaving such remarkable records of their presence as the dazzling cave paintings of Chauvet, Lascaux, and Altamira. The Cro-Magnons, like the Guanches, were a tall people, the men averaging more than six feet in height. Like the Guanches, they had high foreheads, big skulls, wide cheekbones, long skulls, and relatively short arms. We have no way of knowing what color eyes and hair the Cro-Magnons had, but otherwise the resemblance is considerable, and a solid case can be made out for the islanders as being the last surviving vestige of the Cro-Magnon folk, who had moved south from their French homeland to escape later invaders and to find warmer weather and settled in Spain and Morocco, just a short hop across the Mediterranean from the Canaries.

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And the Atlantis connection? One curious thing about the Guanches is that they had no maritime skills—very odd, for island-dwellers. Each group of them lived a land-bound life on its own island, and there was no commerce between one and another. It is tempting to think that the ancestors of the Guanches got to the Canaries at a time in the distant past when some great and vigorously expanding civilization existed in that part of the Atlantic—the Cro-Magnons, let us say. There is not much support for the idea that any human group was capable of lengthy travel by sea at such an early time, but one theory that has won considerable acceptance is that Cro-Magnons could have crossed over from the mainland of North Africa on a land bridge that subsequently sank into the sea. Another theory, a rather more speculative one, to put it mildly, proposes that the Cro-Magnons had originally come *eastward* on that bridge from the lost continent of Atlantis to conquer France and Spain. But either theory easily allows for the theory that the people that became known as the Guanches, having no ability to travel by water, were stranded atop the highest mountains of Atlantis when that continent was swallowed by the ocean, and dwelled in utter isolation on what were now the Canary Islands until the seagoing Spaniards arrived.

I like the idea. I *want* to believe in Atlantis. I'm not really someone who leaps to embrace far-fetched fantastic theories, but the romantic fantasist in me loves Plato's tale of temples roofed with ivory, gold, and silver, of grand palaces, of a canal that flowed through the country for more than a thousand miles, bringing transport and irrigation to a population of many thousands and leading down to a harbor crowded with merchant-vessels from far and wide. I have read with pleasure many a novel of lost Atlantis—Cutcliffe Hyne's *The Lost Continent*, Francis Ashton's *The Breaking of the Seals*, Phyllis Craddock's *Gateway to Remembrance*. As a boy I shivered when Jules Verne's Captain Nemo took his submarine, the

*Nautilus*, to the floor of the sea, showed his companions "long lines of sunken walls and broad, deserted streets—a perfect Pompeii escaped beneath the waters," and chalked the one word ATLANTIS on a block of black stone by way of explanation.

The Spaniards, though they had pretty well wiped the Guanches out by 1497, did preserve a few fragments of their language, which bears no resemblance to any language spoken anywhere else. *Chucar guayoc Archimencey reste Bencom sanec*, we are assured by Antonio de Viana, a native of Tenerife who wrote in 1604, meant "Spare the life of the noble protector Bencom's brother." *Van der relac machet Zahana* was Guanche for "native born who becomes your vassal." *Zucasa* meant "daughter." An *anapa* was a spear carried before the king. The early Spanish accounts give us seven more full sentences and about one hundred single words.

Are these the only surviving words of the language that was spoken by the citizens of Atlantis, or, better yet, by the Cro-Magnon artists who painted the cave of Lascaux? A pretty wild speculation, yes. How lovely to think so, anyway!

One unique thing about the Canary Islands is not in any way speculative. On the seven islands are found some two dozen species of odd-looking succulents that belong to the genus *Aeonium*. Nowhere else in the world are *aeoniums* to be found in the wild, except for one vagrant species native to nearby Morocco. *Aeoniums* do well in the climate of California, and I grow about fifteen different kinds in my garden. (My wife calls them "Martian roses.") I am very fond of them indeed, and have been for decades; and the possibility that my garden is full of plants descended from those that once flourished on the lost continent of Atlantis is particularly charming to me. And so, here in the winter of 2012, I have gone off to the Canary Islands to look at *aeoniums* in their native habitat and, perhaps, to discover a few artifacts of that great vanished civilization of long ago. I'll give you a report when I get back. ○

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## WEBSITES R.I.P.?

### *wake up clicks*

I've been thinking about websites recently—how they've changed and what their future might be. Websites, of course, come in all shapes and sizes. There are personal websites, group websites, commercial websites, and government websites. There are archive sites and information sites and media sharing sites and blogs and forums and portals and search engines and social networks. You can find news, jokes, porn, warez, games, dates, reviews, gossip, flame wars, advice (good and bad), free stuff, and pricey stuff on websites. We all have favorite websites that we visit all the time. I thought it might be interesting to ask some of my Friends on Facebook how they started their days on the net and then compare notes. Here are a few replies:

Aspiring literary fashionista **Susanna Babione** <[asinstoryof.blogspot.com](mailto:asinstoryof.blogspot.com)>: "Check e-mail on phone and read anything personal. Once in front of a PC: read **Doonesbury**, **Frazz**, and **9 Chickweed Lane** <[gocomics.com](http://gocomics.com)>; check **shirt.woot.com** <[shirt.woot.com/Blog](http://shirt.woot.com/Blog)>; sometimes sometimes check **Neil Gaiman's blog** <[journal.neilgaiman.com](http://journal.neilgaiman.com)>. Then it is work stuff for the rest of the day. If it is a weekend, then writing e-mails (usually done in evening on weekdays, if done at all) and Facebook."

**Matthew Wayne Selznick** <[mattselznick.com](mailto:mattselznick.com)>, a creator working with words, music, pictures, and people: "1) Check email (on my phone), 2) Read RSS feeds over coffee (also on my phone), 3) Check personal and client Facebook pages for comments to attend to, 4) Ditto Google+, 5) Ditto my personal web pages, 6) Note Google alerts of mentions of me

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Writer, editor, and teacher **Lisa Romeo** <[lisaromeo.blogspot.com](http://lisaromeo.blogspot.com)>: "Before breakfast or coffee, while waiting for my kid to get up and dressed: check email (four accounts); respond to student and/or client email questions (the easy ones); glance at Google alerts; delete a bunch of emails and wonder why I haven't just taken myself off those lists already; quick check in at Facebook to see if any direct private messages need responses; ditto Twitter; send out the daily writing prompt (to folks signed up at my blog/and students); check kids' school calendars/websites so I won't be surprised later; glance at New York **Times** <[nytimes.com](http://nytimes.com)> website. Repeat."

I got many more replies but these are typical. A couple of things struck me about this admittedly unscientific sample. The first is that everybody checks their email. This shouldn't come as a surprise, except that the net is full of chatter about what is about to replace email. Texting? Tweets? For instance, a 2010 Pew survey, **Teens, Cell Phones and Texting** <<http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1572/teens-cell-phones-text-messages>>, reports that 75 percent of 12-17 year olds own cell phones. Texting is the most popular way to contact their friends, followed by talking on the phone, connecting on a social media site, and meeting face-to-face. Email is at the bottom of the list: just 11 percent of teens use it for daily contact, while 54 percent are busy texting.

Apparently I need more teen Friends.

Another thing that caught my attention was how many folks were accessing the net from their phones or tablets. I have yet to join the iPad generation, but my iPhone's small screen and uneven connection speed do not match up all that well with my established habits of accessing the net. These devices are based on apps, and while apps have not yet replaced websites, they are certainly in competition with them for attention and dollars and features. Of course, this may be just a temporary phenomenon; as the technology progresses, the distinctions between apps and websites and browsers are bound to disappear. The internet is all about information, isn't it? Platforms are just packaging.

Or are they?

### *block that metaphor*

The problem with making generalizations about the internet is that it is so vast and complicated that it verges on the indescribable. Which hasn't stopped the proliferation of metaphors to attempt to describe it.

In the first half of the 1990s, the number of computers connected to the internet jumped from 313,000 to 10,000,000. This was the era when Vice President Al Gore popularized his earlier coinage **information superhighway** <[clinton1.nara.gov/White\\_House/EOP/OVP/html/nii1.html](http://clinton1.nara.gov/White_House/EOP/OVP/html/nii1.html)>. Since nobody knew exactly what the internet was "for," information superhighway was not a bad choice for Net Metaphor 1.0. But neither was it particularly apt. There have been many metaphors proposed since. For example, according to **Kevin Kelly** <[kk.org](http://kk.org)> (no relation), the net is a ubiquitous **copy machine** <[kk.org/thetechnium/archives/2008/01/better\\_than\\_fre.php](http://kk.org/thetechnium/archives/2008/01/better_than_fre.php)>. "In order to send a message from one corner of the internet to another, the protocols of communication demand that the whole message be copied along the way several times. . . . The digital economy is thus run on a river of copies." Or it is a **nervous system** <[forbes.com/2009/03/09/internet-](http://forbes.com/2009/03/09/internet-innovations-hive-technology-breakthroughs-innovations.html)

[innovations-hive-technology-breakthroughs-innovations.html](http://innovations-hive-technology-breakthroughs-innovations.html)> that is inexorably binding us into a kind of hive mind? "As ever more people get connected, we see an acceleration in the way the Internet is used to coordinate action and render services from human input. We are witnessing the rise of a social nervous system." Or perhaps it is a vast **electronic frontier** <[eff.org](http://eff.org)> that we can explore and even homestead, as Howard Reingold suggests in **The Virtual Community** <[rheingold.com/vc/book/intro.html](http://rheingold.com/vc/book/intro.html)>. Similarly, it is a kind of **cyberspace** <<http://users.rider.edu/~suler/psyber/psyber.html>>, through which we imagine that we move and stop from time to time to "visit" sites. "Cyberspace is psychological space. Its social climate partly is shaped by its demographics. As a world structured by machines rather than the physical environment, it also is a space with some rather unique psychological features—such as reduced or altered sensory experience, the opportunity for identity flexibility and anonymity, the equalization of social status, the transcending of spatial boundaries, the stretching and condensation of time, the ability to access numerous relationships, the capacity to record permanent records of one's experiences, and the 'disinhibition effect' . . . to name a few." Or stretching the movement metaphor, perhaps we *surf* through cyberspace. (Here's some net trivia: who coined this odd but appealing slang? Answer: librarian **Jean Armour Polly** <[netmom.com](http://netmom.com)>, aka the "netmom," is generally credited with the first usage in an article "Surfing the INTERNET," published in 1992.) Speaking of libraries, the net and especially the world wide web was once commonly thought of as a vast uncategorized **library** <[zaphod.mindlab.umd.edu/docSeminar/pdfs/p223-duncker.pdf](http://zaphod.mindlab.umd.edu/docSeminar/pdfs/p223-duncker.pdf)>, with each website something like a book composed of many "pages" of information.

### *back when*

The kinds of sites that I commended to your attention back when I first started

writing this column—in 1998, for those of you who haven’t been keeping track—were informed by these last two metaphors: the metaphor of movement and place and the metaphor of the library. These were for the most part static sites, sometimes updated regularly, often not. If they were well-constructed, they might open through the magic of hyperlinks out into the greater web, but many were as self-contained as a book or a fenced-in suburban lot.

For example, in a column in February of 2000 called “Readers Writers,” I went through the list of my colleagues whom you had voted into the top slots in *Asimov’s* Thirteenth Annual Readers Award and reviewed each of their websites. I was crogged that not everyone had a site, and chided friends like **Michael Swanwick** <michaelswanwick.com> and **Lisa Goldstein** <brazenhussies.net / Goldstein> and **Robert Reed** <robertreedwriter.com> for being behind the times. We were, after all, science fiction writers! Fortunately, they’ve since gotten with the program. What were the authors who did have sites of their own posting? Stories, essays, reviews, upcoming appearances, bibliographies, autobiographies. Good stuff, yes, but not necessarily stuff that would bring a reader back again and again. Because they were static, one visit usually sufficed. Which was okay, because the world wide web was, well, *world-wide* and there was a lot of other cool sites to visit and more coming every day.

For both the new writer breaking into print, and the established pro seeking to bolster her name recognition, putting up one of these static websites seemed like a no-brainer. But in time the net stopped being quite so shiny and became just another utility, like water or electricity or cable television. The old-fashioned website began to lose its gloss as well. Meanwhile, the relentless pace of change introduced us to the blog, and editors instructed their writers that blogs, updated as often as possible, were now the key to fame and fortune.

Blogs were big news in 2005, and so in

the April/May issue, I listed my forty favorite writers’ blogs. At that time I noted that **Technorati** <technorati.com>, the top search engine dedicated to the blogosphere, was tracking over four million blogs. **How many are there today?** <infoday.com/linkup/lud021510-stern.shtml> Hard to say: in 2009 Technorati, which was then tracking 112.8 million blogs, changed its focus. There were way too many zombie blogs, still online but never updated. Not only that, but according to publisher Eric Olsen, defining a blog was getting awfully complicated. “It’s become almost impossible to distinguish what’s a blog from a blog site. There are hybrid sites of blogs and news, and mainstream blogs. . . .” For example, I’m a fan of the **Huffington Post** <huffingtonpost.com>. It presents as a classic blog, but calls itself “The Internet Newspaper.” Now I’m as confused as Eric Olsen. Are **Locus Online** <locusmag.com> and **SF Signal** <sfsignal.com> blogs or news-zines? Is the *New York Times* a blog?

exit

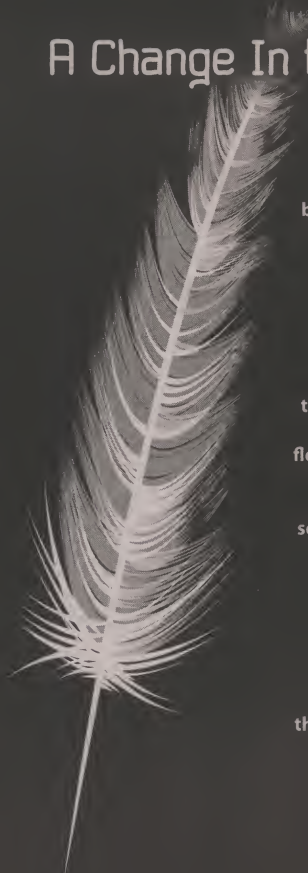
Which brings us back to the little survey with which we began. When I sit down in front of my laptop with my grapefruit juice and bowl of Captain Crunch in the morning and start Firefox, what exactly am I looking at? Certainly not those good old-fashioned websites of the 1990s!

For the record, here is my daily routine:

1. Check email.
2. Browse for news/opinions: *New York Times*, *Boston Globe* <bostonglobe.com>, *Huffpost*, *Locus*, *SF Signal*.
3. Skim Facebook, Google+, Twitter
4. Ego surf on **Google Blogs** <google.com/blogsearch> and **Addictomatic** <addictomatic.com>
5. If there’s time, hit some of my fave blogs

I may run through this sequence in a different order again over the course of the day, depending on how busy I am wasting time.

Or how overdue this column is. (Hi Sheila and Trevor!) ○



# A Change In the Gravity

If gravity weakens,  
buildings will climb  
higher into the clouds,  
Earth-to-orbit flight will  
become more economical,  
cats will nimbly perform  
incredible entrechats,  
and the obese consume  
even more food.

When gravity weakens  
footsteps will lighten,  
tires won't squeal as much  
on hot summer nights,  
flowers and trees will reach  
closer to the sun,  
and the birds of the air  
seem weightless as smoke.

After gravity weakens,  
advising your friends  
to lighten up  
will sound redundant,  
lightening your load  
become a given, and  
the gravity of any situation  
take on a much lighter  
connotation.  
—G. O. Clark

Derek Künsken's last story for us was the amusing, "To Live and Die in Gibbontown" (October/November 2011). In his third story for *Asimov's*, Derek completely switches gear to tell the thrilling tale of a very different sort of assassin on a very different planet pursuing . . .

# THE WAY OF THE NEEDLE

Derek Künsken

## I

The ancient pulsar's lighthouse beam of microwaves and radio waves spun twice per second. Within the bloom of its magnetic field orbited the single planet that had survived the long-ago supernova, at the cost of its crust and mantle. An atmosphere of carbon dioxide had congealed around the little metallic world, producing oceans of iron and nickel carbonyl, dotted with thickets of steel needles that fanned to catch the microwaves. On the largest islands, the growth of the needles had been coaxed into towers, pedestals, and martial walls. Prickly metal creatures held together by strong magnetic fields scuttled in these towns and forts, on eight articulated legs of steel spines. Their fine quills caught the flashing microwaves, generating the electricity for their quick, agile movements.

One of them, whose fame would not be made for many years yet, was uncomfortable in a disguise. Mok was a Follower of the Needle, an order of martial priests. Whereas other Followers and fighters-at-arms bore large metal claws high on their forelegs, Mok now scurried with only small, shameful servant claws. No one recognized him and no one complimented him. Nor would he earn any compliments from this mission; he'd been sent by Master Hac not as a warrior to fight under the full shine of the pulsar, but as an assassin.

Mok tried to fan his steel quills wider, but the road was too crowded. Fussing builders swung long rods culled from faraway orchards, patching the palisaded walls that lined the streets. Shabby, short-needed monks stood where the upturned points of the streets were overlaid with rusted garbage and sniped at each other with pinching claws and philosophical recriminations. Mok paused at a stall where a thinly needled elder showed off processed snow paste. Mok hadn't stopped for the snow paste. He wasn't hungry. He'd stopped for the view of the Ban estate.

The Ban family had consolidated an immense estate on the south road during the clan wars. Its high noble gate showed sprouting buildings and growing towers within the palisade. Slow mercenaries controlled the gate. To the side, at a narrow opening, flowed the swarmers, servants and merchants, short-needed and small-clawed.

Mok was a noble. Anyone with fighting claws was, but his great claws were now preserved on Master Hac's estate, while he pretended to be less than he was to reach his target. He needed an excuse to enter.

He crossed to a rod merchant. He took a pair of rods and scraped a payment of snow paste from his under-needles. He hefted these and scrambled to the swarmer entrance, like anyone else looking to repair a wall. Ahead of him, each of the entrants tipped the door ward, a clawless swarmer with powdery spines.

Mok hesitated. He'd promised to play the swarmer to enter the estate, but had not considered that he'd need to tip one. Tips flowed toward honor. What did it say about him if he tipped a swarmer?

"Hello, friend," the door ward said.

Mok was the finest of the Followers of the Needle. He could not bring himself to reply.

"Are you well, friend?" the door ward asked. His magnetic field was flabby, with distortions around the joints. Snow paste hung in clots, trembling as if ready to drop.

Mok scraped the thinnest gratuity from one of his under-needles and slapped it onto the swarmer's outstretched claw. He hurried through the entrance, humiliated.

The houses and towers of dependent nobles filled the estate. Some stood as tall and wide as Master Hac's tower, while others were narrow spires only large enough for one noble to rest on each level, where they could absorb all but noontime microwaves without obstacles. The Ban manor house and its palisaded drill square dwarfed everything on the estate. Long horizontal needles sprouted from its peak to cast noontime microwave shadows. Through that shadow, Mok would find Master Cist, his target.

Approaching the entrance to the heavily guarded manor house and its grounds, Mok hunched and feigned awkward-footedness, to be unremarkable in a sea of swarmers. Mok heard a noble approaching from behind, his great claws swinging wide arcs, clubbing down swarmers too slow to vacate his path. The noble even stepped upon those he could not bat aside. The crowd groaned. The noble neared, and just before he stepped onto Mok, Mok shifted, so smoothly that it looked like a misstep.

The noble stumbled. He leapt to keep from falling, but the backs of swarmers were no solid platform for a jump. He landed unevenly and aimed his eye stalks at Mok.

"Hey shiny!" he yelled.

Mok laughed and moved to vanish into the crowd. The noble snapped and struck at the swarmers in anger.

"Stay where you are!" the noble yelled.

The crowd of swarmers stilled. Mok could have leapt over them or moved between them, but he realized with an icy clarity that he could not without revealing that he was much more than a swarmer. He struggled between duty to Master Hac and honor, and then smothered years of training to feign fearfulness. The noble's claw clubbed Mok's face, snapping thin needles, bending thicker ones, and knocking him sideways. Mok kept his feet, forgetting that any swarmer would have been on his back by now. When the noble lunged again, Mok forced himself to be still. The great claw hammered a bend into Mok's front arm. The other great claw pinched Mok's shoulder.

"You made the wrong enemy, shiny swarmer," the noble said.

"Fool!" said an approaching guard. "Can you afford the rust price if you kill him?"

The noble, sparking angry, tightened the claw around Mok's shoulder. "Don't cross me again, shiny," he said.

He threw Mok backward. Mok tumbled. His quills wedged in the ground and bent. He cried out.

"Don't let him in," the noble said to the fighters-at-arms, skittering back through the entrance.

Mok flailed and jerked, trying to free the wedged quills. He was stuck.

## II

Ten days ago, in the streets around the market, Mok had knocked away the assassin's claw with the *Flowering Fist*. His opponent rattled back on six legs, the tiny piners scraping at the uneven rods of the street. Mok executed the *Pincer's Pleasure*, catching both of the assassin's forearms just below the great claws.

"You fight like a Follower of the Needle," Mok said. "Who is your Master?"

The assassin's lower quills shivered. Fear.

Mok tightened his grip. Metal screeched. One of the assassin's wrists bent backward.

His eye stalks waved.

The sliding rods of steel snapped. One of the assassin's severed claws rang against the metal spines of the street.

Mok's swarm tittered their appreciation and threw compliments.

The assassin's feet scrambled. Mok twisted. The other claw bent.

Still no answer. Mok shut his great claw over his assailant's spiny head. The *Claw's Epiphany*.

The assassin's legs folded and his body clanked to the street. The fine, articulated needles, in life held in magnetic balance, flattened in relaxation.

Mok scanned the street with his eye stalks. The gathered crowd refrained from offering tips before he'd boasted. But there was no honor in defeating an anonymous opponent. He could not boast. He batted the nameless assassin in frustration.

His swarm busied themselves in trimming the dead assassin with tiny claws. They hefted the two severed claws under three swarmers each. They snipped his needles and wedged them into the bristle in their own bodies, for use later.

Mok set off for home, fanning his needles flat to catch the noontime microwaves. His swarm followed, murmuring a stream of compliments. Nobles and swarmers made way for the size of Mok's claws and his reputation.

The stockade ringing Master Hac's school speared high with straight rods. Cadets with smaller, less-skilled claws saluted him as he scuttled in the front gate. His swarm stooped through the service entrance farther away.

"Ho, Mok!" one of his peers called from across the courtyard. "Laden with booty, but not boasts?"

"Ho, Kak!" Mok answered. Kak was, like Mok, a skilled Follower of the Way. "You know my greatness well, but . . ." His pause drew more attention than the absence of boasts. "I was set upon by a nameless, swarmless villain."

Conversation stopped. Eye stalks swiveled toward him.

"Who scuttles without a name?" Kak asked incredulously, approaching fast, holding his great claws high. "I hope this does not affect your tips?"

"My greatness is unchanged," Mok said pointedly, holding out a minor claw.

Kak scraped snow paste from a lower needle for Mok. It was a small tip. Two other Followers abandoned any pretense of sparring and approached, expecting a story. Instead, the shadow of the master appeared on the balcony overlooking the courtyard. Every Follower and swarmer prostrated themselves. The most accomplished Followers of the Needle, Mok among them, had the privilege of offering large tips. Microwaves pulsed hot in the stillness. Flakes of iron carbonyl snow drifted down.

"Scuttle with me, Mok," Master Hac said.

## III

At the entrance to the Ban manor house, someone took Mok gently by his upper spines, and helped him to his feet. Mok found a decrepit swarmer facing him. Mok stood uncertainly. Normally, when a swarmer helped him, they gave him a tip. What did they do amongst themselves?

"He got you with all of that, didn't he?" the swarmer said with the diction of a rod chopper. "He bent a few."

Mok tested his shoulders. They were whole. He felt at the bends in his upper spines. Then, reluctantly, he scraped a gratuity off a lower spine. The swarmer looked at him strangely, but took the food.

"I'm Rag."

"Mok."

"Want help straightening out?" Rag asked.

Mok snapped a pincer in negation and clawed backward. He retreated until, far from the frenetic crowds, he found an unclaimed perch on a single rod. He mounted it, spreading his needles wide to catch every bit of the pulsar's rays, feeling like an unproven bud for having been beaten by a crass, hired claw. He straightened his bent needles, and removed fragments of joints that scraped against one another after the manhandling. He stayed there until the pulsar set.

Only reserves of snow paste could power movement when the direct shine of the pulsar's microwaves was gone, so only the fittest escaped dormancy after dark. Even those capable of activity could not endure it for long.

Mok hugged the shadows, distorting his magnetic field to match the ambient field. No smell. No sound. By midnight, under the glow of blurry radio sources and hard, sharp x-ray stars, he huddled close to the noble entrance. At night, guards shut the swarmer entrances to the manor, and left one fighter-at-arms squatting at the open noble entrance. Mok climbed, clawhold by clawhold, up the wall, the scrape of his joints so quiet as to be echoes carried on an overimagined wind. He stilled at the apex of the entrance. His magnetic field leaked neither smell nor sound.

*I am the Needle.*

He dropped, fanning his spines. The guard jerked.

Mok jammed his front claws into the thin knot of spines between guard's body and head. *Cold Knife*. Mok pulled closer, driving two more claws hard into the same spot, cutting, snapping. *Knife's Follower*.

The guard collapsed, dead.

Mok puffed. A yelling boast struggled to emerge, to incite nobles and swarmers alike to come compliment and tip, to recognize his honor. He'd gone without admirers for so long. Instead, he pincer the need and carried the guard outside the palisade. Using claws too small for the task to be quick, he clipped rod after rod until the guard's great claws lay severed.

*Be the Needle.*

Mok held them high and puffed his spines wide and proud. Then, he scuttled across the courtyard. At night, from a distance, he would appear to be a fighter-at-arms making slow rounds. He heard movement, but no one approached.

Across the courtyard, an elegant opening led to a bank of poles for nobles to climb to the upper levels of the manor house. Mok eyed it for long moments, but laid the stolen great claws there and made for the low opening where swarmers ascended.

He crept up a well-scratched rod, past levels of poorly smelling kitchens, workshops, and scrap depots before he reached the swarmer barracks. The latch on the

door opened for him and he snuck through. Twenty swarmers slept in huddled lumps. A door was closed at the other end of the room, while two barred windows opened onto a slow wind. Perched on the bars were dormant swarmers, catching what microwaves they could at this time of night. Mok hunkered down to a shallow sleep.

Before dawn, an alarm sounded below. Swarmers shifted, but no one rose. He ached to see what was happening, but feigned unsettled sleep. Cries became louder, veined with orders, and soon, two fighters-at-arms burst in. They scuttled everywhere, inspecting each swarmer. A big, clumsy fighter-at-arms held Mok for a quick, close look. Then he tossed Mok away and moved on to others. They left, closing the door behind them.

Mok settled. The swarmers scraped films of old snow from the bent needles of the floor and spread it on their quills. A swarmer watched him. Mok lowered his eye stalks, pretending to graze like these reprobates. The swarmer approached and hunkered close.

"So you made it in, friend?" It was Rag, who'd helped him yesterday.

"Yes."

One of Mok's front claws had accumulated what could only be called a snow scum. He could not spread the filth on his body. He held it out, a tiny offering. Rag took the tip without shame and said nothing else. Mok feigned sleep.

They were released to their duties by mid-morning, but only in the courtyard. Mok inserted himself into the carrying and cleaning. He was no one. Gossip blew like a tidal wind. A low-ranking guard had been killed at night, and the assassin had escaped. The frustration of the nobles turned to needless blows and harassment of the swarmers. Mok was embarrassed for the nobles; there was no honor in beating swarmers.

In late afternoon, Mok saw Lord Ban strut past, young, long-needed and shiny. Graceful nobles scuttled behind, offering tips. One of Ban's court stood above the fawning. He was older and well-shaped, moving with the grace that comes from one of the Ways. His claws gripped the yard with a precise awareness of his surroundings. He moved in the court position reserved for the regimental commander.

*Awe.* The highest compliment Mok could offer. This was Cis, an old Master, long hidden, whom not even Master Hac could defeat. Cis passed, but the awe did not. Something new colored it: fear.

At twilight, the swarmers were herded to their barracks and given wages of old snow paste. Mok forced himself to spread this half-powdered gruel on his needles to keep up his strength, but it was thin, bitter food. Rag approached. His pungent smell was invasive.

"I never seen a swarmer as shiny as you," Rag whispered. "And you move like you never broke a needle."

Even without great claws, Mok had several movements to kill a swarmer at this range: *Night Blossom's Petal*, *Fiery Heart*, and *Claw of the Way*. *Long Finger* would do the job in utter silence.

"You were a noble, weren't you?" Rag said.

Mok sputtered, retracting his eyes. Rag neared. Mok poised a claw beneath Rag, the preliminary stance of *Long Finger*. Was Rag an informant? Covert security?

*Hide in plain sight.*

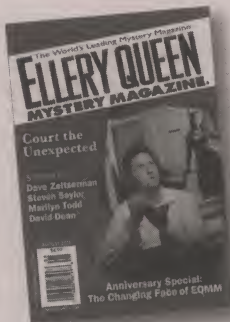
"It is secret," Mok whispered. "My lord took my great claws for crossing him. I fled. If he finds me here, he'll kill me. I tried to get close to Master Cis today, but I could not."

"Why?"

"Maybe he can make me a noble again," Mok said.

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Rag's eyes spread in surprise, then narrowed again. "I work in the upper apartments. I've seen him there."

"Can you get me in, so that I can speak with Master Cis?"

"You would get killed for bothering Master Cis," Rag said. "I might too."

"Trust me."

"Why? You're not my friend."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Do you trust people who aren't your friends?" Rag asked.

Mok wasn't sure he understood the question. "I trust brothers in arms," he said simply.

"I trust friends," Rag said.

Mok shuffled his feet. "Let us be friends?"

"Oh no," Rag said. "I can't."

"Why not?"

"You don't like me."

Mok snapped his mid-claws in frustration. Swarmers looked toward them. "I am doing you a great honor by even speaking with you. When has a warrior ever spoken with you?"

"Never."

"You are obliged to return the honor."

"No, I'm not."

Mok's pincers snapped again. "What kind of reprobate are you?"

"You don't know anything about swarmers, do you?" Rag said pleasantly. "You're going to have trouble fitting in."

"I'm not trying to fit in."

"It shows," Rag seemed to be regarding him with curiosity now instead of fear or respect.

Mok retreated three steps. He rarely had trouble understanding situations. Until now. Swarmers did not value honor. They gave tips because they had to. What mattered to them? He returned to Rag.

"I will do you the honor of being your friend," Mok whispered. "I would be pleased if you could tell me what I need to know to like you."

Rag laughed, so much that he fell backward. Mok felt a laugh in him, until he realized Rag was laughing at him. Then, he angered, but even his rage bogged in confusion. If no one knew him here, what did honor mean in this place?

Rag picked himself up. "There is nothing to tell to make you like me," Rag whispered. "Nobles tolerate swarmers for the tips, the service, and the fawning. We are not fast or graceful in the way you value."

"We can't be friends?"

"It is not what you know of me," Rag said. "It is how you look at me."

Failure felt like two needles scraping, instead of sliding smoothly, over one another. "I can look at you in any way I wish."

Rag pincered a rusty needle from the detritus on floor.

"Can you value this?" Rag asked. "It is of no use to you. It cannot make you stronger, offer you tips, or weld your alliances to great families."

Mok's eye stalks spread. He scraped a gratuity from a lower spine. Rag accepted it. Mok waited for the courteous response. None came.

"Friends don't fawn," Rag said. "Friends don't trade honor and tips. When one is hungry, friends give him not only something, but everything. Friendship is about making a friend happy."

"Why did you take the tip, then?"

"I'm hungry."

The snow paste on Rag's lower needles was thin. He powdered almost everywhere.

"You are shabby," Mok said. "No one helps you."

"I don't have friends either," Rag shivered.

Mok did not answer. Rag laughed again, shivering his magnetic field, dislodging more of his shabby, powdering smell. Mok felt the eyes of the room, judging his association with this lowest status swarmer. But what did it matter what swarmers thought of him if he accomplished his mission? If he'd had his great claws instead of these snippers, the whole room of them would be falling over themselves to fawn and tip him. "I wish to be friends," Mok said finally.

"I don't believe you," Rag said.

Mok hunkered glumly and they spoke no more.

The pulsar outside lowered to the horizon and finally set. The swarmers went dormant. Mok waited until silence covered them all. Then, sharing that silence, he balanced his weight through all eight legs, onto eight different needles in the floor.

*The Eight Cardinal Points of the Way of the Needle. Balance. Calm.*

He lifted a leg. Rebalanced himself. *Stance of Dawn.*

*Raise another leg. Stance of Morning.* Unsettling. The balance was different without the pride of great claws. Inferior? He puzzled over the question. No, just different.

*Raise the third leg. Stance of the First Oblique Shadow. Reaching for harmony.*

*Fourth leg. Stance of the Noon Shadow.* Equilibrium eluded him. He smoothed the asymmetries in his magnetic field.

*Fifth leg. Stance of the Second Oblique Shadow.* Three claws held him on three needles. No swaying. Utter silence. Flawless magnetic field. But without great claws, the forces felt odd.

*Sixth leg.* His six legs speared outward like heavy quills. The two remaining claws each gripped a needle. He sought the *Stance of Evening*. The danger of falling increased the longer he braced between the needles. Honor. Friendship. They were competing ethics. Honor was superior, but he could not balance on that needle without the weight of his great claws. Friendship with the lowest of the swarmers was a bitter substitute. Nor would his weight settle on that needle either. He didn't know how to find the balance on that one leg.

He lowered his claws, one by one, from *Evening*, to *Second Oblique Shadow*, *Noon Shadow*, *First Oblique Shadow*, *Morning*, and finally, *Dawn*. Home. Without having achieved *Night*.

#### IV

Five days ago, Mok had climbed to Master Hac's balcony and offered large clots of paste on both great claws. Master Hac, old, but shiny, accepted the gratuities.

"Tell me of your assailant," Master Hac said.

Mok told the tale of the assassin's unannounced appearance, of his targeting of Mok as a Follower of the Needle, of his lack of swarmers and of his dishonorable refusal to name himself. He accounted for the entire battle, move by counter-move. Master Hac asked about the assassin's strikes and parries. Mok described them, though he had never seen their like.

"Show me," Master Hac said.

Mok swiveled his claw, thrusting it upward, like *Pulsar's Tide*, but without positioning to execute *Emptying Oceans*. Master Hac circled him.

"Were your assailant's rear claws tensed to leap?"

Mok's eye stalks separated in surprise. "How did you know?"

"Hunch your rear legs."

Mok did as the assassin had done.

"Yes," Master Hac said. "The movement is called the *Rising Tide*. The *Gliding Ghost* follows it."

"Why do I not know these movements?"

"There are perhaps four Masters of the Needle who know of these movements," Master Hac said. "None of us teach them. They belong to the Followers of the Tide, an extinct school. I learned of these as a young Follower. The philosophy of the Tide is incompatible with the Way of the Needle."

"How could my assailant have used such techniques? The rest of his movements resembled ours."

"The Followers of the Tide are no more, but one sought to revive their Way," Master Hac said. "He was called Cis. He followed the Needle beside me. Cis would one day have become a Master, but he was arrogant, becoming enamored of the dead philosophies of the Followers of the Tide. Our master drove him away. Cis swore revenge and wandered, without swarm, without school, hiring his claws to any noble's fight. If he has returned, it is for revenge. And even in my youth none could best Cis save our master, but I have had many years to ponder his weaknesses."

"I am the greatest of your students!" Mok said. "I deserve the privilege of leading the strike against Master Cis."

Master Hac measured him for long moments.

"You may lead the strike. Go to the courtyard and spar," Master Hac said, "without your great claws."

"What do you mean, Master?" Mok asked, horrified.

"You will fight your brothers, but you will not have your great claws."

"But Master Hac, without them, I have neither honor nor chance."

"With them, you have no chance either," Master Hac said. "Speak to no one of your mission."

## V

In the morning, in the Ban manor house, Rag went to his normal tasks in the upper chambers. Mok bustled with a cleaning detail in the workshops where the swarmers plied their trades. Busy artisans built furniture. Others fashioned rods of poetry that could be heard by running a sensitive pincer up and down the magnetized lengths. Mok scraped the walls of the workshop and carried the tailings of the artisans to the malodorous chute at the far end of the room.

He scraped the wall beside the guards at the entrance to the upper tower, looking for a stealthy way past. The closest guard snapped a claw at him. Mok retreated while they glowered. He needed help to get to the upper chambers.

When the pulsar was low on the horizon, the entrance to the noble chambers was locked. The swarmers clotted in twos and threes, slicking snow paste on their lower quills, helping one another to smooth awkward spots. A jocular mood infected the room and magnetic laughter tittered. Mok stood alone, strangely restless.

Rag crouched at the opposite end of the barracks, near the scrap chute. His needles fanned with more hope than effectiveness to catch waning microwaves. He spread snow paste on his lower quills unevenly. The lumps would cause him problems. Mok clawed across the room to join him. The cloying scent of rust drifted from the scrap chute.

"You're making lumps," Mok said. He smoothed the snow on Rag's lower quills, but then stopped self-consciously.

"You need more discipline," Mok said.

"Easy for you to say. You were probably schooled."

"Discipline is not easy for anyone. It is a choice," Mok said.

"You've had practice."

"Practice is just making the correct choice repeatedly."

"Are you trying to make friends?" Rag asked.

"Your shabby condition frustrates me because you don't need to be like this. You could be healthy and acceptable to the others. You could be happy."

"Do you care if I'm happy?" Rag asked.

"I don't want anyone to be unhappy," Mok said.

"Are you happy?"

"I'll be happier when I speak to Master Cis."

Rag's magnetic field shuddered with early signs of starvation. With some exasperation, Mok scraped a large gratuity from his lower claws, processed and tasty, and held it to Rag.

Rag moved to take it, but Mok pulled back. "I'll put it on," Mok said. "You'll do it wrong." Rag stood tall, giving Mok access to his lower quills. Mok spread the fine paste so evenly that the shape of Rag's lower magnetic field sharpened.

"Bribes won't help," Rag said. "You cannot build a friendship on owing."

"I'm not trying to make friends anymore," Mok whispered. "I don't understand how you think, but I know how I think. You helped me days ago, so I now help you."

Spreading the paste properly and smoothing older feedings took time. Rag's magnetic field strengthened. When Mok finally sat, Rag looked healthier, even though the spines around his eye stalks and on his back remained powdery.

"What is it like to be a noble?" Rag whispered.

Mok cleaned his own needles. "I'm not sure anymore."

Mok sat in silence, with Rag and his smell.

"I'll take you into the upper chambers," Rag said finally.

Mok stilled. "Are we friends?"

"Yes."

The answer made Mok oddly proud.

## VI

Four days ago, on the estate of Master Hac, Mok had been exhausted. Using only servant claws, he had sparred against one Follower of the Needle after another, all skilled and boastful. He could not tell them why he'd removed his great claws, so they suspected some punishment from Master Hac related to his performance against the unnamed assassin. He'd been the best of them for some time, so they chortled at his expense and were not gentle.

Few attacks did not require the weight and cutting leverage of great claws. He tried those that did not. *Needle's Son* was blocked. He spun, delivering the *Deceptive Foot*, and was blocked. The *Humble Claw* briefly touched his sparring partner, but Mok fell beneath the other's great claw. The *Crossed Savior* defense came close to flipping him on his back in the courtyard. The other Followers boasted at his expense. He tipped each one.

He slunk to his roofless cell near the top of the school. Rows of shiny steel rods formed the walls. Tiny, sharp needles grew from the floor reaching for the sky. The placement of his cell was a place of privilege he had earned, high above the palisade walls and courtyard.

Copses of walled manors, estates, and towers, their fine needles and thick rods reflecting starlight, sprawled beyond the school's palisade. Colors dotted the sky. Some

were pure colors, like the x-ray green of the star in the left eye of the Constellation Pik. Others shared colors, like the radio orange and thermal blue of Pik's wingtip. The magnetism of the pulsar braided the colors.

Honor and obedience warred in him. He deserved more than this. He was the finest of Master Hac's Followers. He should have shone in his purity. Instead, he'd been tied to other colors.

The next day, Master Hac had plucked the long needles from Mok's back, inserting shorter, duller quills, the kind that swarmers had, those that caught fewer microwaves. Then, he instructed Mok in new movements, ones with no need for great claws.

"How can I charge into battle like this, Master? There is no pride in this," Mok said, after another difficult practice, holding up the claws useful only for laboring.

"Ends and means may shadow one another, depending on the time of day," Master Hac said. "Assassination is a tool we always have, but one whose price we must count carefully."

"Where is the honor counted?"

"In your obedience," Master Hac said.

Mok averted his eye stalks.

## VII

Rag brought Mok to the guards of the upper chambers of the Ban manor and told them that he needed Mok's help. Rag had swarmed and tipped the Ban family for a long time and was known to the guards. They let Mok pass. Beyond, Mok found the achingly familiar patterns and precedence of the nobility, while scraping the shiny walls with Rag. No one noted him.

*Be the Needle.*

At midmorning, Master Cis himself passed. He glided across the floor of needles like a wind, great claws high and motionless. Perfection. Not even Master Hac could summon such grace.

Mok feared, as he hadn't since he was partly grown and short-needed, facing Master Hac for the first time. Only self-doubt could make fear true, but his doubt reeked. Mok was the best of Master Hac's students. One day, he might master the *Needle*, but Cis had clearly mastered the *Needle* and explored the ethical and martial terrain beyond. Master Hac had explained this, but Mok hadn't understood, viscerally, what he would be facing. With his own long needles, fully charged under the pulsar, and well-fed by gratuities from his swarmers, he might have had the strength to make a respectable showing. But not now.

Near the end of the morning, near where Mok worried at a hardened lump on the wall, two nobles met. One moved with the control and grace of a Follower. The other, larger, with longer needles and brutish manners, spoke like a mercenary officer from another province. The officer asked how Master Cis would like the troops arrayed for drilling. The Follower replied that Master Cis would be in meditation in the afternoon. A Follower would drill the troops. Mok became anxious. Master Cis might be alone today. He sidled closer to Rag with a sudden idea.

"I have need of your needles," Mok said.

"What?"

"To borrow them for a time. I will give them back."

"Why? Are you sick? I'll die!"

Even with all his needles to catch the direct microwaves of day or the stray ones of night, Rag was not healthy. Without, Rag could go into deep dormancy or die.

"I don't do it for light reasons." Mok said. "I will owe you a debt for all my days."

"Will this help you become a noble again?" Rag asked.

"Maybe."

"Will I get them back?" Rag asked.

"I hope so," Mok said.

Rag's eye stalks drooped. "We just became friends. This is so much to ask and I'm scared of dying."

"I am too," Mok said, surprising himself with the truth in his answer. Where was his noble boasting?

Mok led Rag higher into the noble chambers, cleaning as they went. By noon, they reached the roof, where the budlings of Lord Ban would bathe in the hot flashing glow of the pulsar. Part of the roof had been partitioned off, clearly for Master Cis. It was empty.

"We shouldn't be here," Rag whispered. "Only Lord Ban's personal swarmers are allowed to clean here."

"I know, but this will be my only way to meet Master Cis."

"We're going to get in trouble."

"I understand your fear. I know our friendship is new, but I cannot do this without you. To help you understand my need, I can tell you that a noble does not ask for help. He earns it. I do not have time to earn yours, but I ask it anyway."

Rag lowered his eye stalks and followed Mok.

Mok and Rag scraped the floor, spine by spine. Mok took care to put some of the cleaned snow residue in places he hadn't yet cleaned so that his cleaned sections contrasted greatly with the parts they hadn't yet reached.

"Now is the time," Mok said. "Soak all you can while the pulsar is high. I will take some of your spines now."

Rag trembled.

Mok maintained the sounds of cleaning with secondary claws, and removed needles from Rag's back and sides with his front claws. Rag's magnetic field quivered with each removal. Mok steadied him, smoothing the paste on those he left, cleaning the magnetic field, spreading and ordering Rag's needles wider to better catch the microwaves. His other claws busily integrated the stale needles into his own body. As their numbers grew, he felt himself growing stronger.

Rag had not yet panicked. If he did, everything was lost. He might need to be removed, but disposing of him would be difficult here. And the thought of treating Rag as an enemy was now unpleasant.

They moved along the platform, soaking in the thick microwaves of noon.

It wasn't enough. Mok had learned the limits of his new shape, powered by shorter needles, armed only with pincers. The blow he envisioned trying, not yet even named, needed more strength than he had.

"Rag," he whispered. "I need more."

"But I'm feeling funny. The pulsar is waning."

"I'm sorry, Rag. If I'm to . . . make myself happy, I need more."

"What are you going to do?"

"Will you give me the needles I need?"

"I'm feeling shabby," Rag said.

"I ask as a friend."

Rag looked away.

"It pains me to ask this of you," Mok said.

"I haven't had many friends, Mok," Rag said. "No one ever asked me for this. I feel like I'm being used."

"I know," Mok said, pulling a half dozen more needles from Rag. Rag now looked

plucked. The shabbiest spines were of no use to Mok, so Rag was left with those he'd not kept shiny. Mok felt the small jump in energy from the new spines.

"Stay calm. When Master Cis arrives, keep cleaning," Mok said. "I'll speak."

"I can't breathe," Rag said. "I need to rest."

"No!" Mok whispered. "You'll draw the wrong kind of attention to us. We must appear to be two normal swarmers."

Rag scraped listlessly at a rod in the partition. Mok scrubbed, listening for the approach of Master Cis.

"What is this?" a smooth voice demanded.

Mok turned. Master Cis, long-needled and large-clawed, stood on the roof. His stillness was perfect. Mok hadn't heard anything. Cis was as silent as the *Needle*. Mok felt hopelessness in his marrow. He dropped into a servile pose, eye stalks low, two large tips held before him.

"We were sent to scrub the roof, Master," Mok said.

Master Cis took the gratuities. "While the rooftop is dirty, I guess that you rascals have not been sent by anyone and that you are here to bask."

"We aspire to the perfection you deserve," Mok said, "but as you note, we have not the talents. My friend needed outside duty to renew his strength to better serve you."

"Take your unworthy companion with you. Never let his gracelessness approach the top of this tower again," Master Cis said.

Rag was utterly silent. Master Cis turned away, but Mok flung himself before him, eye stalks touching the floor, claws bunched beneath him.

"Master, I have been incomplete with you," Mok said. "My friend may die without the noon rays of the pulsar. I beg your forbearance."

Mok felt the sharpening and hardening of Master Cis' magnetic field. Its rigidity was remarkable. Mok quailed beneath it. Master Cis was about to speak in anger.

Mok drove his two right forward pincers deep into Master Cis' neck. He twisted his body to drive them far, using his magnetic field to disrupt Master Cis' control. And he named the movement.

*Rag's Sacrifice.*

Master Cis sputtered, but his magnetic field did not collapse. Cis closed one great claw on a thicket of needles and tore away a quarter of Mok's back. The quills tinkled on the roof, quiet and ironically musical.

The shock nearly demagnetized Mok. If not for all of Rag's needles mixed among his own, he would have died immediately. Mok huddled under Master Cis, underside to underside, and stabbed upward with two more mid-claws. Master Cis reached for him, reared up, tore free more needles.

*Rag's Sacrifice*, deep in two different spots, shook the older warrior. Mok smelled the powdering. His own and Master Cis'.

Master Cis severed one of Mok's legs in his great claws.

Mok made no sound. He sought balance.

Noble. Swarmer.

Honor. Friendship.

Boaster. Fawner.

He drove his pincers deeper.

*Be the Needle.*

Timeless, silent, they strained.

Then, Master Cis tipped and fell.

Dead.

Mok trembled, dragging himself from the carcass. He staggered, seven-legged, toward Rag. Rag was dying. He scooped the needles Master Cis had ripped from his back and stabbed them into Rag.

Mok could not go back through the tower and the barracks. He could not disguise a missing leg and a dying swarmer. Their battle had been quick, but someone would eventually come.

Mok hefted a drooping Rag and wobbled to the edge of the tower. Mok stepped over the edge, clinging with five claws, using the remaining two to hold Rag. His legs strained at their sockets.

*Pain! Focus.*

In his mind, he ran through the *Eight Cardinal Points of the Way*, stance by stance, as he descended. Pain receded. He descended in graceless fits. He dropped the last few body lengths, unable to hold on. One of his pincers broke off.

*Pain! No sound! Be the Needle! Balance.*

He limped around broad buildings. The world became not the sharp needle, but a pained blur. Near the gate to leave the manor house, a blow knocked him down.

"Not so shiny now, are you?" It was the guard who had struck him days before. "I said you made the wrong enemy."

Mok had no strength, nothing left with which to tip. But he had honor, and could claim more. *I am Mok*, he thought, *Follower of the Needle, and without great claws, I killed Master Cis*. A death-boast to leave a legend. Immortality. But it was not the right stance.

Rag would die.

*Be the swarmer.*

"A noble ordered me to take this swarmer out of the estate to die," Mok said, "so that his unworthiness does not pollute your fine lawns. He said that due to my shabbiness I may not return."

"Get out quick, shiny," the guard said, "before somebody has to clean you up."

Mok lumbered out of the manor house, carrying Rag. Curious swarmers gawked, but did not help. Reputation and gratuities bound noble to noble. Friendship bound swarmer to swarmer. In anonymity, he had no reputation. In falsehood, he had only the friend he'd mutilated. Like his failure to achieve balance in the *Stance of Evening*.

Mok stumbled on the south road. Nobles observed with disdain. Swarmers sidestepped. Shabby, but pure of purpose, Mok endured, like a needle washed by the ocean. He fell. He rose. He heard voices, but plodded onward with six legs and his dying friend. Within sight of the palisades of Master Hac's estate, Rag's magnetic field fluttered. They fell to the ground. It was almost evening, and the *Stance of Night* yet eluded him.

"Rag," Mok said. "I'm sorry."

"I saw what you did," Rag whispered.

"I did what nobles do," Mok said. He pulled the last of Rag's needles from his own back and shoved them, one by one, into Rag. "I'm sorry."

*Balance?*

Rag's body accepted the needles, but the microwaves were thin and westering. How long had it been? Mok's eye stalks drooped.

"You are brave," Mok said.

"I'm not brave."

"You risked yourself for me."

"That was not bravery," Rag whispered. "That was friendship."

"I am not a good friend," Mok said.

"You don't know how to be a good friend," Rag said. "That isn't your fault." His magnetic field flickered again.

A long-needled noble passed. Mok signaled him, but the noble continued. *Stance of Evening*. Unstable. Tipping one way, then the other. Mok's eyes dropped lower. A swarmer saw them and scuttled close.

"Hello, friend," Mok said. "I belong to Master Hac. Can you take us to him?"

"I'm not strong enough to carry you both, but I can carry you and come back for your friend."

"No," Mok said. "He'll die if I leave him. Get help from Master Hac. I'll wait here with my friend."

The swarmer ran off. Mok's eyes drooped, watching Rag die, helpless to stop it.

In his mind, he ran through the *Eight Cardinal Points of the Way* to keep pain at bay, but he could not even imagine *Stance of Dawn* with a missing leg. The balance would not work and he could not pretend he had not lost a limb. Then, he saw how to balance at the *Stance of Evening* without great claws. He needed to balance not just his limbs, but his core. He stood high, needles straight up, to catch the last microwaves of the day. Then, he pulled his own needles from his back and slid them into Rag's. Then, a kind of night did come.

A thick, metal-laden wind whistled through a thousand needles on the roof of Master Hac's tower. Mok's great claws felt heavy, odd. He was strong. Fully charged under the microwaves of the pulsar.

When his master appeared, Mok fluidly lowered his eye stalks, slipped a great claw low and deftly skimmed a generous gratuity. He held it between them, on a gracefully still claw. Astonishingly, Master Hac lowered his own eye stalks and offered Mok an equally sizable tip.

Mok touched his eyes to the floor. "I am not worthy, Master Hac."

Master Hac replaced the tip, but did not take the one offered. Mok looked up. Master Hac was bright.

"My opponent never knew my name. I struck without challenge. I don't deserve it."

"Some victories cannot be boasted of because they will not be understood," Master Hac said. "What you did with claws is not essential. Everything other than the blow was essential. Many Followers could have learned *Rag's Sacrifice*. No one else could have earned it."

"What does that make me, Master? An errant ready to set aside his honor?"

"You are not yet wise, Mok. You must reflect on this."

Master Hac finally took the waiting tip. Mok stood straighter, honor satisfied. Then, to his horror, Master Hac reached onto his own back and pulled out one of his quills, long and silvery. He held it to Mok on two great claws.

"I cannot," Mok said, backing away. "Please replace it. My battle with Master Cis is not worth it."

Master Hac stepped forward. "This tip is not for what you did to Master Cis. This is for what you did for Rag."

"I don't understand, Master."

Master Hac set the needle in Mok's great claws. Mok held it reverently.

"Someday you will."

Master Hac retreated, leaving Mok alone under the hot pulsar.

Mok set Master Hac's needle into his back. His awe would not abate and for all his thinking, he did not understand where he would find wisdom. The pulsar tugged at the horizon and the wind died before he descended to his swarm.

They complimented, the volume growing when they saw the new needle in his back. His brother Followers approached, waiting for the boast behind this unprecedented honor.

Mok neither boasted, nor passed by his swarm. He greeted a few swarmers by name, which silenced them. Then he reached and touched Rag, who stood among them, cleaner, stronger, taller. Rag offered a gratuity on a trembling pincer. Mok accepted the tip, and offered one of his own. ○

# Discoveries in the Annals of Poetry

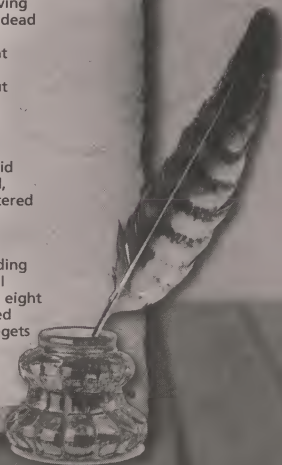
In 1896 Henri Becquerel left Baudelaire's sonnet atop a plate smeared with photographic emulsion. Later he dipped the portrait in chemicals, and found fevered words burned across his own face.

Aboard a train, Albert Einstein thought: am I traveling toward a job stamping patents, or fleeing crockery shattered against walls during that last fight? And: if I moved fast enough, her accusations would be frozen in the past. In the margin of Rilke he wrote an equation proving all their arguments were about the dead child, that all griefs were the same only viewed from different velocities, that words and actions can be interchanged, but at a cost so heavy it could shift the light of distant memory.

Marie Curie stirred a pot of the words she wished she had said to Pierre before he was crushed, boiled them to a black tar that blistered her skin, her bones, her heart.

And Lise Meitner, in a cold basement in Berlin, found that adding a single syllable was not neutral but led to two more, then four, then eight (Newton, she realized, who hated poetry, was wrong; every action begets an opposite and doubled reaction) until the chain of words might ignite the world.

C. W. Johnson



Leah Cypess is the author of two YA fantasy novels, *Mistwood* and *Nightspell* (HarperCollins/Greenwillow). You can learn more about her writing at [www.leahcypess.com](http://www.leahcypess.com). Leah brings a perfect blend of her experiences as a former practicing attorney and a current mother of three children under the age of five to her chilling depiction of . . .

# NANNY'S DAY

Leah Cypess

Everybody knows you don't keep a nanny for more than three months. The agency even asked me, when I hired Steph, if I wanted to make an appointment to interview someone new in February. I actually laughed out loud—I can barely keep an appointment I make a *week* in advance—and told them I would call.

Which I intended to. I really did.

But then the case that was supposed to settle didn't settle, and Sammy had an allergic reaction to peanut butter, which was scary and also very time-consuming, and then he had a regular cold, which meant I spent all my spare time cuddling on the couch with him, and . . . I don't know. The three months passed and slipped into four and then five. And I didn't notice.

Until Saturday morning, the week of the trial, when I was home because I had told the managing partner that if I was going to be in D.C. working the trial for most of the next week, I was going to spend that weekend—*Mother's Day* weekend!—at home with my son. My insistence on spending most Sundays at home had already "compromised my partnership track," and he scowled and muttered before he agreed to an entire weekend, but I held firm.

So I made pancakes, and we were sitting at the table eating, and I was trying to decide whether playing Chutes & Ladders or reading books was a better use of our quality time, when Sammy made a face and pushed his pancakes away.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

He stuck his lower lip out. "I like them better when Steph makes them."

"Oh," I said. The sense of guilt was so familiar I barely registered it. Of course he liked Steph's pancakes better; she made him breakfast five days a week. I blinked away the slight stinging in my eyes, and forced myself not to go through the well-worn mental calculation of how many more hours she spent with him than I did. "Okay. Well, I made them, and these are the ones we have. Are you going to eat them?"

He shoved the plate across the table. "NO!"

"Fine," I said, a little snappily. I don't enjoy making pancakes, and it's not like I

need the calories myself. But rejecting food, I reminded myself, was one of the few ways a three-year-old had to assert independence. I should let it go. I kept my voice even. "If you don't want to eat, Sammy, that's okay. Do you want me to read you *Nate the Great*?" His face screwed up. "I want STEPH to read it to me!"

"Sammy—"

"I want Steph to take care of me *all* the time." He glared at me, lower lip jutting out. "She said that she would, if that's what I want." The tantrum took off then, tears rolling down his smooth round cheeks. "And that's what I want!"

Which was how I ended up at my kitchen table at three A.M., ignoring the mountain of trial prep piled up to my right, instead reading frantically through my three-page contract with the childcare agency.

The clause was there, in fine print, near the bottom of the second page:

The CAREGIVER, *Steph Seyon*, agrees not to sue for custody at any point during or subsequent to the period of this agreement.

Short, simple, reassuring. And never tested in court.

I drummed my fingers on the table, trying to turn my attention to the two hours of work I still had to do before I went to sleep. But my eyes seemed glued to that single line. The agency had added the non-custody clause last year, after one of the popular news-vids had run a segment on nannies who successfully sued parents for custody of their children. The clause sounded iron-clad, but nobody knew if it would stand up in court. Everyone was waiting for that first test case, when a nanny tried to sue for custody of her charge despite the non-custody clause.

*She said that she would, if that's what I want.*

I did not want to be that test case.

A wail erupted from the other room. I turned the contract face-down and hurried in to where Sammy was sitting up in bed, his face screwed up, tears streaming down his round face. An instinctive sympathy lanced through me, so sharp it hurt.

"Moouooooommmmy!"

I pulled myself onto the bed—the rail-field, keyed to him, flickered as I passed through it—and wrapped my arms around his small shaking body.

"What's the matter, Sammy? Did you have a nightmare?"

Ten minutes of incoherent wails later, I managed to get him back under his blanket, still whimpering. When I tried to slide off the bed, though, he locked his arms around my neck.

"NO! Stay with me, Mommy!"

"Sammy, I can't—"

In a split second, those ten minutes were undone. Sammy launched himself at me, screaming, and I vainly tried to disentangle myself. Being overpowered by a three-year-old was a regular occurrence in my life, but I was tired and worried and achy, and my patience snapped. I grabbed both his wrists, held them away from me, and slid through the rail-field.

He was repelled by the field when he tried to follow me, and his wails reached ear-splitting pitch. Though I knew the rail-field was designed with enough flex to keep from hurting him, I couldn't help wincing.

"Sammy. I can't." If I got into his bed, he would be up for an hour trying to get me to tell him stories. "Mommy has a lot of work to do, and you need to sleep. You're a very tired boy—"

"I don't WANT you!" he screamed, battering at the field with his fists and feet. "I want STEPH!"

And that was the end of any chance of my sleeping that night.

I had planned a trip to the aquarium for the next day, and was looking forward to Sammy's wide-eyed wonder when I showed him the dolphins. But I was so exhausted from my sleepless night that instead, I ended up letting Sammy watch two hours of television while I napped on the couch. On *Mother's Day*. Go me.

"Two hours?" Annette said, when she showed up for movie night. "That's what Becca watches on a good Sunday."

"You're too hard on yourself," Kate agreed, flopping backward on the couch. "Motherhood isn't the priesthood, Margaret. You don't have to forswear all worldly things."

Kate's ex-husband had custody of her daughter, and Annette was a stay-at-home mom; this was going to be a pointless discussion. I smiled weakly and went to get wine for both of them. Last week, Kate had broken up with her latest boyfriend, so I'd made sure to get her favorite (and very expensive) wine. She grinned when I handed her the glass, and I settled on the couch between her and Annette.

It was our yearly Mother's Day ritual: we got together, ate pizza, drank too much, and watched *Goodbye Nanny*. I wasn't looking forward to it this year. But I flicked on my v-screen, and began drinking even before the movie started.

"The case imprinted on America's memory," drawled the voice-over, and the screen lit up with the overdramatized version of the story everyone knew. It started from the point of view of the nanny, a plump fifty-year-old woman who had raised someone else's child from infancy, grown to love him "as if he was her own"—the phrase they used back then. Then it switched to the mother, with her business and recreational trips, her strings of affairs, her history of neglect.

"I never really wanted children," she told one of her lovers in one of the most famous scenes of the movie (famous mostly because the lover was played by Steve Yu). "But since he exists, I guess I love him. It's biological, you know?"

By the time the lawyer revealed that she didn't even know the name of her son's favorite teddy bear, we were all bawling. But we saved our real tears for the end, when the nanny lost the case and was led away. The little boy flung himself against his mother's grip, her long fingernails cutting into his shoulders, screaming, "Nana! Nana, don't go, please stay with me! Nana, why are you going away? WHY?"

The movie ended there, and text scrolled across the screen. The decision had been overturned five years later, reversing the bioist trend of American custody law. Too late for Edward Seiver or his nanny. But in time to save the next generation of children.

THE NEXT GENERATION OF CHILDREN remained on the v-screen, black on white, for a full minute. Then the credits rolled.

"Ironical, isn't it?" Kate said, propping her feet up on a couch pillow. Annette was still sobbing. She'd only had two glasses of wine, but she got tipsy fast. "They're thinking of renaming Mother's Day. Calling it Nanny's Day or Caregiver's Day or something like that."

"Doesn't really have the same ring, does it?" Annette sniffled. "Still, it's about time. Mother's Day is kind of bioist."

"Most children," Kate said, wiggling her toes, "are still raised by their parents."

"That doesn't mean we can't show sensitivity." Kate and I exchanged amused glances; Annette tended to get self-righteous when drunk. "There's a reason this movie is shown every Mother's Day. To remind us about the dangers of bioist privilege. Just because we're their biological mothers, that doesn't automatically mean we're the ideal people to raise our children."

I burst into tears.

Twenty minutes later, the entire story was out, and I was still sobbing. Kate and Annette did their ineffectual bests to comfort me, but it wasn't until Annette went to the bathroom that Kate slid down onto the floor next to me and lowered her voice.

"You've got to fire her," she said. "Tomorrow morning."

I swiped at my eyes. "But—what if she wants—"

"What she probably wants," Kate said, "is money. Not custody. That's what most of the nannies want, and why most of these cases never go to trial."

I bit my lip. I knew that was a horrible thing to say, borderline bioist. But I hoped it was true.

"I know a mother who lost a custody case," I said. "I mean, my secretary knows someone who knows someone. The nanny moved to California. The mother hasn't seen her son in five years. He probably wouldn't even recognize her if she did see him."

"You won't lose Sammy," Kate said. "Not you, Marg. You're a good mother. Sammy loves you."

*And that's what I want!*

Just a tantrum; kids will say anything to get a reaction. Even so, I couldn't speak for a moment, my throat tight with fear.

"Tomorrow morning," I said finally. "Thanks, Kate. I'm sorry I ruined movie night."

Kate shrugged. "There will be another Mother's Day next year. Or whatever they're going to call it."

Then Annette came out of the bathroom, and Kate and I fell silent.

The firing didn't go well.

"I understand that you want him to learn another language." Steph's lips twisted on the words. "But I think Sammy will be very upset by this. Perhaps more than you realize."

I smiled tightly, hating this woman who had fed, bathed, and played with my son for the past seven months. Seven months! How had I let it come to this? "I think he'll be okay."

She folded both her hands on the table. She was a short, thin woman with shiny dark hair that she wore in a long ponytail. I had scoured through the five pages of reports from previous families she had worked for—all waxing ecstatic about her rapport with children—but I didn't know much about her personal life, except that she was in her mid-forties and divorced. I wondered if she had children of her own to love.

*She said that she would, if that's what I want.*

Maybe she hadn't said it. Maybe Sammy had misunderstood, or lied. I didn't dare ask her.

She watched Sammy every day. I usually came home barely in time to put him to bed. How different would his life really be if she was the one who put him to bed, who stayed with him on weekends too? The news-vids had a story every week about a mother who had lost custody of her child to a nanny. The reporters were generally smug about it. The mothers, obviously, deserved it.

A shiver ran through me. I said desperately, "I could give you a bonus. A . . . a large bonus."

"I do not want money," Steph said flatly. "I want what is best for Sammy."

Great. Now I had insulted her. I should have known better than to listen to Kate, whose opinions had always tilted right-wing.

Sammy was in the other room, frowning with concentration as he colored in a picture of a horse I had drawn for him. I glanced at him through the door, wanting desperately to go kneel next to him and wrap my arms around him and giggle with him over his color choices for the next half hour. But I had to go to work. Every morning until now, I had comforted myself with the thought that he really loved playing with Steph, that he wasn't sorry to see me leave.

"Is it your intention to fire me regardless of how it will affect Sammy?" Steph asked.

The slight formality of the sentence warned me. I stared at her for a moment. She smiled at me, a sharp-edged smile of triumph.

"No," I said. "Of course not. I just thought it was worth discussing."

Once I was at work, a quick search of the firm's case database told me why that sentence had sounded memorized. It was. It was the sentence the nanny had used in *McAvoy vs. Chen*, a successful nanny-custody suit in Kentucky five years ago.

I stood there staring at the screen for a long moment. Then I bolted from my office.

"It's not too late." Beverley Ganteaume swiveled her chair around and folded her hands on her desk. "I understand how this feels, Margaret, but please calm down. The hysteria about the nanny custody issue is mostly media-driven. Most nannies have no interest in adopting the kids they watch. And even when they do, 99 percent of the time, the nannies lose the custody battles."

But 1 percent of the time, they won. I didn't have to say it. Beverley had three kids, and switched nannies every two months, like clockwork.

"But this is *planned*." I knew I sounded paranoid, but I didn't care. I trusted Beverley. "You should have heard her; it was like she was following a script. You know how everyone is waiting for the case that tests the non-custody clause? I'm going to be it. They've *chosen* me." I swallowed hard. "Because they think I'll lose."

Because they thought I was a bad mother.

Beverley grimaced sympathetically and turned back to her computer. "Let's not jump to conclusions just yet, okay?"

Beverley was younger than I was—I had been her mentor when she joined the firm, and we had become close friends—but she was the custody expert. She tapped her fingers on the screen. "There's no caselaw on the preemptive non-custody clause, but . . . it doesn't look good. The whole point of the modern custody system is that a child should be taken care of by the adult who has the strongest emotional attachment to him, not the one with the strongest biological ties. I don't see a court ignoring the results of an attachment test because of a few lines in a contract saying the nanny can't sue." She pursed her lips and blew out a short breath. "Did you offer her—"

"Money. Yes."

"She wouldn't take it?"

I shook my head numbly.

"That's concerning."

There was a 3D picture of Beverley's kids rotating above her computer. I looked at it, but I didn't see her girls; I saw the picture on my desk of Sammy, tilting his head at me with his bashful half-grin. The thought of him being taken away sent a stab of pain through my chest. Suddenly the hours until the workday ended seemed like far too long to go without seeing him. On some days, I wished I could just quit my job, go home, and play with him on the living room floor until he was old enough for school.

On most days, I knew I would have gone stark raving mad after a few days of it.

So instead, I was at work, where—if I was really honest with myself—I wanted to be. I liked immersing myself in my job, figuring out the complex legal problems I was so good at. I liked being an adult surrounded by adults. It was better than doing the same twelve-piece puzzle for hours at a time.

So Steph was the one doing that. Steph was the one who *could* do that, day in and day out. It didn't seem like sufficient reason for me to lose him. Not when I loved him so much.

I gripped the arms of my chair. "I'm a good mother, you know. There's no way she loves Sammy as much as I do. I mean, she's more patient with him and she spends more time playing with him, but that's because it's her *job*. She doesn't have to wor-

ry about getting dozens of other things done at the same time. I spend as much time with him as I can. Every second that I'm not working."

"Margaret." Beverley leaned forward, a single crease running across her broad forehead. "I know."

Another unspoken line hung between us, that neither of us needed to say: *But does Sammy?*

Only the attachment test could say for sure. And I wasn't going to let it come to that.

"Well, well," Daniel said. "I think the word *irony* could be used here. Don't you?"

My stomach twisted, and I wished I'd made this call audio-only. My ex-husband's smug, handsome face made me want to put my fist through the v-screen.

Instead I turned back to the kitchen counter, so that my back was to him. I'd known he would gloat; I'd known I would have to endure it. So here I was, enduring it. "Glad to hear you're capable of three-syllable words now, Daniel."

Or not so much.

He laughed. "You were pretty eager for the attachment test during our divorce, weren't you? When you were so sure which of us would win?"

A breastfeeding mother versus a man who hadn't even bothered to take his paternity leave? No, it hadn't been much of a contest. I had been the one who could comfort Sammy when he woke up at night, the one he called for as soon as he could speak, the one he clung to when he was scared. Back then, the attachment test had benefited mothers. Besides, Daniel hadn't even wanted Sammy. He'd just wanted to take him away from me.

Sometimes it felt like that was all anyone wanted.

"I *told* you that if you wanted to raise him yourself, you were going to have to quit—"

I tuned him out, something that had grown more difficult now that I was no longer in practice. After his fourth round of reasons why Sammy was going to be messed up because of the way I was raising him, I decided he'd had enough time to get it out of his system. And if not, too bad.

"I've always made it easy for you to see Sammy," I said evenly. "Even when I don't legally have to. I did it because I thought it would be better for him. Do you think Steph will do the same?"

That silenced him. Not that he had ever taken advantage of my openness, but Daniel was always more motivated by what he didn't have than by what he did.

"You sound pretty sure she would win," he said finally.

"I'm not sure at all." Even as I said it, fear twisted through me, thick and sour. *Sammy*. "But I don't want to take the chance."

"Sure you don't. That's why you're desperate enough to call me." Daniel stretched his arms above his head. "What do you want me to do about it?"

I took a deep breath. "Date her."

He dropped his hands. "What?"

"Start a relationship with her. Then dump her. If she sues for custody after *that*, it will look like a cheap attempt at revenge. Or at least confuse the issue enough that I can get the case thrown out before they order an attachment test." Or convince the agency that I wasn't a good test case after all.

There was a moment of silence. Then Daniel said, "I'm impressed."

I didn't doubt it.

The story was on the pop-up screen the next morning: *Bioist Blackmail*. It was all about the crazy neglectful mother who had asked her ex-husband to compromise her

loving, selfless nanny because she couldn't accept being replaced in her son's affections. There were already fifty-seven comments, but I stopped reading after the first three:

Wouldn't it be simpler for her to just read him a few bedtime books? But I guess she didn't have the time. I wish I could say I was surprised but I'm not.

—Anne from New Jersey

43 people liked this

I'm not surprised either. She's a mom, she did what she had to in order to keep her kid. I'd do the same. I know you'll all just label me bioist, but I don't care. It's true.

—Loving Mom from Alabama

3 people liked this

I used to be a nanny and trust me, this is typical of most of the moms I worked for. I felt sorry for their kids. I would have sued for custody myself if I didn't have five kids of my own.

—A Nanny from USA

26 people liked this

There were no names in the article, which only meant the news service hadn't yet completed the verification process. I was sure the names—my name, Daniel's name, Steph's name—were encoded in, ready to pop up as soon as it was legal.

My first thought, buried in a wave of shame, was: *Thank God Sammy can't read.*

Daniel answered on the first buzz, already smirking. "Why, hello, Margie."

"You . . . you . . . *why*? Do you *want* Steph to have our son?"

"No. I want him."

I couldn't think of anything to say. Luckily, it was a vid-call, so he could see me gaping.

"Well, clearly *you* shouldn't have him." He ran a hand through his hair. "I'm going to ask for a repeat of the parental attachment test. By law, that has to happen before your nanny gets tested."

True; that law was one of the remnants of the old biologically based custody laws. It had been struck down in thirty-eight states, but Ohio wasn't one of them. Yet. "Daniel," I said, as calmly as I could (not very), "you can't honestly think you'll *win*? You've seen him three times this year."

"And we had fun each time." Daniel leaned back. "I'm not the one who's been yelling at him and putting him in time-outs and ignoring him when he wants to play. Which of us do you think he loves more now?"

"That's—that's not how it works!"

"Well," he said smugly, "I guess we'll find out."

Our attachment test was recorded, so Daniel made sure to look his best. His best was very good, a fact that made me hate him more.

I hadn't bothered to get dressed up, beyond a maroon business robe and a smattering of hypo-cream on my face. And that was only because I was hoping I could make it to the office afterward. Today's trial didn't scare me at all; I wasn't worried about the result of *this* attachment test. And since they never televised the boring ones, where custody remained with the mother, no one would see what I looked like.

Sammy looked frightened as they fitted the brain-wave recorders to his head, and my heart twisted. Nothing had ever made me hate Daniel more than the things he was willing to put Sammy through, just to get to me. I wanted to hug my little boy

and tell him it would be okay, but because this was an adversarial test, neither Daniel nor I was allowed to be with him. He kept saying, "Mommy?" as he cried, but Daniel's smug expression never even flickered. Arrogance makes smart people stupid.

We walked into the testing room together, which was new. Back when we had been tested for our divorce, we had entered through separate doors on opposite sides of the room. The attachment-measuring technology had, obviously, been refined over the past couple of years. But the indicators were still there, probably for dramatic effect: two lines, one red and one blue, running up the back wall. There were cameras trained on the wall and on each of our faces.

"Mommy!" Sammy screamed, and hurled himself across the room into my arms. I grabbed him to me and hugged him close, breathing in his soft clean scent and whispering that it would be okay. After a moment, I looked over his shoulder. The red line had lit up all the way to the top. The blue one had barely budged.

I smiled as I buried my face in my son's hair. "I'm sorry, Sammy. I'm sorry we had to do this. But it's okay now. Mommy's here, and we're going home."

In a small voice that was still loud enough to be picked up by the mikes, he said, "Will Steph be there?"

I got the summons from Steph three days later. The attachment test was scheduled for less than two weeks away, which meant the case had been fast-tracked. Which meant someone with power had arranged for it.

I was staring at the summons, my throat so tight I couldn't breathe, when Steph walked into my living room.

We looked at each other. There was nothing to say. Sammy was still asleep, I had to go to work, and we both knew the law. Until the attachment test was done, I couldn't keep her from taking care of Sammy.

And afterward, she might be the one who could keep him from me.

I knew what I had to do: walk out the door. It was the only thing I *could* do. But I could no more move than I could speak. In the bedroom, Sammy grunted in his sleep, and the blankets rustled. On most days that would have been my cue to delay leaving for a few minutes, in case he woke up and I could kiss him goodbye before I left.

His innocence made my heart hurt. I was supposed to protect him, and I didn't know if I could.

"Margaret," Steph said. "This doesn't have to get ugly."

My eyes stung. My heart shrank in on itself. "Please," I whispered, not caring how humiliating it was. "Don't take him away from me."

Steph shook her head. "It's not about you, Margaret."

"I'm late," I said, when I could breathe again. It took all my control to keep from slapping her as I walked past her out the door.

My firm's detective agency was expensive and discreet. After telling the senior partner I had to drop the D.C. case (he didn't argue, so I knew he had read the news article), I called them.

They were fast, too. Within two hours, I had a three-inch file on Steph sitting on my desk.

For all the good it did me. She was, of course, completely clean. If the agency's goal was to make sure the non-custody clause was struck down, they wouldn't choose someone with the slightest flaw to sue for custody of my child. It had to be crystal-clear who would be the better parent. Steph had even gone to law school for a year, then dropped out because "she wasn't attracted to the lifestyle."

I frowned over that for a moment; something about it didn't make sense. Then I shook my head. It didn't just make sense, it was perfect. Such a contrast to me,

the ambitious, career-driven, wants-to-have-it-all mom who wouldn't put her son first.

I swore and slammed the file shut. Well, what had I expected? She had been *chosen*, just like me. I had kept my previous nanny for seven months; the one before that had quit on her own after a year. The agency must have known I would do it again. That Steph would have time to make Sammy love her. Love her more than he loved me.

Did he really? I thought of him as a baby, his wide blue eyes following me everywhere, blindly trusting. I thought I had fulfilled that trust. When I had first gone back to work, everyone had assured me that hiring a nanny wasn't a failure on my part, that Sammy would be perfectly fine. And I had believed them. He was still so happy to see me when I came home at the end of the day. He knew who his mother was.

Didn't he?

As if in answer, my v-screen lit up. I recognized Daniel's light-pattern and straightened eagerly. A shouting match would feel good right about now.

But it wasn't Daniel—at least, not in person. He'd always been good at revenge. This time, he'd sent me a clip.

From *Goodbye Nanny*.

It was a ten-second clip, so fast I didn't have time to turn it off. The little boy, wailing, bewildered pain on every inch of his innocent face. The scream, ripped from his throat: *Nana!* And the mother, cold and triumphant, not aware—or not caring—about how badly she was hurting her little boy.

I sat at my desk, breathing hard. And then I flicked my finger at the screen and touched *replay*.

"Nana, don't go!"

I played it again.

And again.

Daniel wasn't quite as good as he thought he was. Every time I watched, I was struck anew by a streak of righteous happiness, almost pride:

*I am a good mother. I am not like that.*

*I will win this case.*

It wasn't until I was on my way home that I realized I could do better than that.

When I walked in, Steph was on the floor doing a puzzle with Sammy. She didn't notice me right away, but Sammy did. He looked up, grinning so widely his whole face seemed alight. "Mommy, look! I did the *whole thing* by myself!"

"That's amazing," I said, clapping my hands together. "Wow, Sammy. I'm so proud of you!"

Steph scrambled to her feet. "I'll see you tom—"

"Actually," I said, "why don't we talk? Sweetie, do you want to take the puzzle apart and do it again? Come tell me when it's done so I can see it."

Steph trailed me warily to the kitchen. I pulled out a seat, sat, and said pleasantly, "I didn't know you went to law school."

She leaned back against the counter, knees bent as if she was ready to run. "I did. A long time ago. I thought being a nanny was more suited to my personality."

"That would work for you," I said, "if you wanted custody of Sammy. But I don't think you do."

She glanced into the living room, where Sammy was tearing the puzzle apart with glee. "What are you trying to say?"

"I think you should know," I said, "that I'm going to concede."

Her eyes narrowed. "What?"

"I'm going to concede custody to you. I'll explain that I realize I was never cut out

to be a mother, and that my son should be with the person who can love him best. And then I'll ask for generous visitation rights. I don't doubt I'll get them." I smiled. "So. Congratulations?"

Her mouth worked. After a moment, she said, "Why?"

"Because I won't let him be a pawn." Anger surged through me, and it was a moment before I recaptured my cool, clinical tone. "I know why this case is important to you—to the agency. But I won't let you put my son through this just to prove your point."

"Margaret." She took a deep breath. "I'm sorry. I don't want to take Sammy away from you."

"I know that. And I don't want to take him away from you," I added, which was a flat-out lie. But I knew she wouldn't call my bluff. Not now that I understood what this case was really about.

I waited until she reached the door before adding, sweetly, "You'll always have a place here."

Until the agency pulled her off, to try again. She was too good a candidate not to be a part of their next attempt. Especially the fact that she had gone to law school, and so no one could argue that she didn't understand the contract she had signed.

The next mom probably wouldn't figure that out.

I ate dinner with Sammy (Steph was a great cook—I would miss that), let him watch an edu-show while I cleaned up and answered some emails, then read him a book and got him into bed. I waited until I heard his breathing even out, then went to his room and stood there looking down at him for a while. He was sleeping with his butt sticking straight up in the air, his cheek mashed against his pillow, so sweet that I risked waking him up by leaning over and kissing his forehead. He muttered something, but he didn't wake up.

Not wanting to push my luck, I tiptoed out of the room and shut the door firmly behind me. Then I settled on the couch and selected my saved version of *Goodbye Nanny*.

This year's Mother's Day viewing hadn't counted; I hadn't enjoyed it. Tonight, I fully intended to appreciate every second. After all, it was the reason I had figured out what the agency was really after.

*There's a reason this movie is shown every Mother's Day.*

There was. But not to help the nannies. To help the mothers.

This was why my friends and I were yearly riveted to this film, the one that made the case for our children being taken from us. It wasn't because of our deep belief in the rightness of attachment-based custody. My belief, I now knew, was barely skin deep. I doubted Kate's or Annette's—or most mothers'—was that much deeper.

No. We loved that documentary because we *weren't* that mother. For all the tiny guilts that piled upon us, day after day—missed school events and unhealthy dinners and not hearing our kids because we were sorting mail—we weren't as bad as *that* mother. We could tell ourselves we had nothing to worry about.

But we still fired our nannies every three months.

Which must make life difficult for the nannies.

*Ninety-nine percent of the time, the nannies lose.*

They didn't want the clause struck down. They wanted it upheld. That was why I had been chosen. Because I *wasn't* that mother.

Because Steph had been a law student, nobody could argue she didn't understand the non-custody clause. Because I was pretty decent as a mother, nobody could argue that upholding it was unnecessarily cruel. The court might—*might*—have upheld the clause. And wouldn't that be better for everyone?

"Better luck next time," I said under my breath, and I meant it. In the bedroom, Sammy let out a soft snore. I flicked on the movie and settled back to watch. ○

James Van Pelt's fiction has made numerous appearances in most of the major science fiction and fantasy magazines. His first collection of stories, *Strangers and Beggars*, was recognized as a Best Book for Young Adults by the American Library Association. His second collection, *The Last of the O-Forms and Other Stories*, includes the Nebula finalist title story. His novel, *Summer of the Apocalypse*, was published in November 2006. The recently released *The Radio Magician and Other Stories* received the Colorado Book Award. James blogs at <http://jimvanpelt.livejournal.com> and teaches high school and college English in western Colorado. His familiarity with secondary education in America is definitely an assist in his tale of . . .

# MRS. HATCHER'S EVALUATION

James Van Pelt

Yesterday's conversation with Principal Wahr kept Vice Principal Salas awake all night. "We need to cut the dead weight, Salas. Those teachers who aren't on board with the new curriculum will be moved out, and I want them moved out immediately." Wahr, a skinny man with just the barest wisps of white hair on an otherwise bald head, kept one hand on his keyboard and the other on his phone. As he talked, he studied his computer screen, which Salas couldn't see. "Hatcher's the worst. She ignores the lesson plan template we instituted last year. She doesn't write her objectives on the board for the students to see, and I've sat in her class. Lecture from the tardy bell to the dismissal bell. She's a dinosaur. I'm adding her to your evaluations. Vice Principal Leanny has ignored Hatcher's performance forever. We need fresh eyes on her."

"I haven't heard anything bad about Hatcher," said Salas. "She earned teacher of the year two years ago."

"Popular student vote. Doesn't mean squat." Wahr leaned forward. "Here's how I know she needs to go. My son is going to be a freshman next year, and I don't want him in her class. Best practice, Salas. We're a 'best practice' school, and all the studies say lecture doesn't work in social studies." Wahr turned his attention back to the computer screen, then tapped a couple of keys. "Watch her. I've got to eliminate a teaching position, and since the state removed tenure protection, she's the best candidate. Here are two other possibilities. You're doing their evaluations now." Wahr

dropped file folders on the desk between them. "Evaluate and choose. Somebody's got to go. Budget, Salas. Budget and best practice."

He knew Hatcher, a pleasant, older woman, tending toward fat, who looked like Salas's grandmother. He'd never observed her teaching, though. That night, as the moon moved a tree's shadow across his bedroom wall, Salas realized he'd have to start Hatcher's evaluation immediately. He'd get notes from Leanny, then drop in to Hatcher's last period American History class.

Vice Principal Salas organized his day by piles. The tallish one on the left contained discipline action sheets for students in trouble, many for attendance issues, but also for cell phones in the classroom, smoking, drugs, insubordination, and one for a Theodore Remmick, a freshman who'd brought a small propane torch to school in his backpack. Parent contact sheets made the middle pile. He spent most days on the phone talking to parents, often about the first stack. Teacher evaluations made up the third pile. Much of the time he avoided the third pile. He'd been vice principal at Hareton High for fourteen years, and he knew all the teachers. If they weren't sending kids for discipline (which meant they were good at classroom management), then he limited his contact with them to drop-in visits while they were teaching. Salas evaluated the N-Z teachers. Leanny handled the other half of the alphabet.

Salas dreaded evaluations. Before he'd taken the vice principal job, he'd taught four P.E. classes and one Remedial Reading (his minor had been English), so he felt silly trying to evaluate the academic disciplines. He'd gone into P.E. because he liked sports and kids. He'd been an indifferent student himself.

"Hi, Salas. What did you need?" Vice Principal Leanny leaned into his office without stepping in, her grey-rooted dark hair pulled into a ponytail. She'd started teaching French and Spanish the same year Hatcher joined the faculty, but moved into administration after ten years. With Jack Quinn's retirement from Tech Ed three years ago, the two women were the longest tenured employees in the building and old friends.

"What can you tell me about Mrs. Hatcher?"

Leanny grimaced. "Wahr's after her, isn't he? It's not the first time. Best teacher we have. I don't know why Wahr wants to mix up the evaluations. I've been giving her exemplaries as long as I can remember."

"No one gets exemplaries!" Wahr had directed them not to give teachers the highest rating. He had said, "Everyone can get better. Besides, if we give a teacher the highest rating, it's hard to fire him."

"I know. Wahr has a fit."

Salas said. "I heard she ignores the curriculum and just lectures. That doesn't sound good."

"You haven't observed her, have you? Don't do a drive-by like Wahr does. Give her a half hour."

"Can you send me your notes on her for this year? I need to get up to speed."

"Sure. Check your e-mail later." Leanny rubbed her forehead, as if she had a headache. "Theodore Remmick is waiting outside. Is he for you? His family lives on my street. They're a piece of work."

Salas sighed. "Yeah, send him in."

"By the way, I heard you're Wahr's hit man now."

"What?" He glanced guiltily at the folders the principal had given him.

"Wahr hands that duty off. He's never fired anyone. The last time the school lost teachers, he gave it to the head counselor. Sorry it's you. The counselor quit the next year. He worried he'd be asked to do it again."

Salas shrugged. "What are you going to do? Send Remmick in, would you?"

Theodore Remmick had to be the smallest boy in the freshman class, thought Salas. The boy's feet hovered above the floor as he sat in the chair by the round table

where Salas talked to the discipline problems. Remmick's nose was narrow, and his hair hung over his eyes as he looked down.

"Why a propane torch?" said Salas. "What were you going to do with it?"

Remmick said, "Did you know a cow didn't kick over a lantern in the O'Learys' barn to start the Chicago fire in 1871? Some newspaper guy invented the story to sell papers." Remmick smiled without looking up. "Like a fire that killed three hundred people needed a fabrication to be more interesting."

Salas paused. Sometimes a kid would deny the accusation. Sometimes he rationalized or defended, or he wouldn't speak at all. Talking nonsense introduced a new tactic.

"You know, a propane torch is a safety issue."

"The fire burned so hot the roofs blocks away caught fire before the flames reached them. The fire jumped the Chicago River. That's a big river. And it kept going. Started on Sunday morning and didn't stop until Monday evening when the wind died and it rained."

"What does this have to do with a propane torch? Were you going to burn something?"

Remmick brushed the hair off his forehead. His eyes were brown and clear. "From Lake Michigan's shore, the sky above the city turned orange. Thousands of people fled to the lake. I saw flame tornadoes rising through the smoke, and it roared like a train." He closed his eyes as if feeling heat on his face.

"Son, why'd you bring a propane torch to school?" Salas put the torch on his desk. It was tiny, a hobbyist's tool, not much larger than a cigarette lighter.

"Project for class. Can I go now? I'm missing band." He squirmed in his seat.

Salas looked at the boy thoughtfully. "They don't have torches in the shop?"

"I'm not in shop. History. It's a group assignment. I volunteered it."

The discipline guide for the district didn't list a propane torch in any category, so Salas decided to lump it under "item inappropriate for a school setting" on the action sheet. "A week of lunch detention, and any project in the future that involves flame or explosions, assume you can't do it."

Remmick hopped from the chair, and then offered Salas his hand. "Thank you, Mr. Salas. I'll keep it in mind."

When the boy left, Salas shook his head. I could write a book, he thought for the umpteenth time in his education career.

The History department head, Mr. Young, really was young. The wall posters in his classroom still hadn't yellowed, and he flinched when he saw Salas at the door: a classic, inexperienced reaction. He had become the department head by arriving late at the meeting last spring, when the History teachers voted on who would attend the extra meetings and take charge of the departmental paperwork.

"According to the district pacing guidelines, the American History classes should be looking at the causes of WWI. If she's only to 1871, she's almost a half century behind." Young ran his finger down the teaching objectives for the class. "They should know mutual defense alliances, nationalism, militarism, and imperialism, and from the unit they will be able to discuss America's emergence as a military and industrial power. They only get a week. We have to be to the Cold War by April's end or the first week in May." He thumbed open a section in the notebook. "We have two required benchmarks for the unit: a multiple choice test and a short essay question. I have the rubric for the essay if you'd like to see it."

Salas tried to look interested. He remembered being fifteen himself and his own tour through American History. He recalled biplanes from WWI, but nothing else, which made him think about Snoopy vs. the Red Baron. Of the classes he'd hated, History bored him the most. If it weren't for sports eligibility, he'd never have been motivated enough to pass.

Salas almost asked Young what he thought of Mrs. Hatcher, but he didn't want to start rumors.

From the back, Hatcher's classroom looked like most social studies rooms. She'd covered one wall in maps. Presidents and historical scenes covered the other wall. A long whiteboard stretched across the front. Book-filled cabinets stood behind him. He smelled dry erase markers and carpet cleaner as he leveraged himself into a student desk the right size for a sixth grader, maybe, but not comfortable for an adult.

Mrs. Hatcher stood beside her desk at the front, straightening papers—she'd waved when he walked in. Salas filled in the preliminary observations on the evaluation check list. Although Hatcher did have writing on her whiteboard, Salas didn't understand it. In one column were names: "DeKoven, Meagher, Catherine, Barber." Then some presidents: "Harrison, Jackson, Adams, Monroe" Then some states: "Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Ontario." Salas was pretty sure Ontario was in Canada. She'd written one sentence on the board: "It ends at Fullerton Ave."

What Hatcher had not written were the class learning targets, which were required. Somewhere she should have posted what teaching standards the students were addressing for the day, and what they should be expected to do when the lesson ended. Salas had the WWI standards Young had given him, including, "I will be able to explain why America became involved in the First World War."

Students trickled into the room, taking desks around Salas. Theodore Remmick came in, nodded in Salas's direction, then found his place. A dark-haired girl who clearly didn't know the dress code forbade showing too much skin sat in the desk in front of him. "You look pretty mature to be a freshman," she said.

"Just a visit," said Salas.

The tardy bell rang. Salas waited for tardy students so he could record Hatcher's procedure with them, but students filled all the desks, and there were no tardies. Conversation buzzed in the room.

Hatcher started speaking without asking for the students to quit talking. Salas gave her a low mark in the "Commands student attention before beginning instruction" category.

"We've moved the Chicago Fire project to Saturday." By the time she said "Saturday," the room had grown quiet. "Can somebody bring a big box fan? I'll provide the extension cord."

A boy sitting underneath the covered wagons poster raised his hand.

"Thank you, Sean. Remember it's at ten in the back parking lot." She stepped behind her podium. "We're going to jump four years to 1876 today and talk about the Battle of the Greasy Grass, which some might recognize as the Indian name for the battle better known as Custer's Last Stand."

Salas flicked through the required social studies scope and sequence guide for American History. He couldn't find the Chicago Fire, and the class should have covered Custer's Last Stand a month earlier, and only in passing. The district's guidelines emphasized teaching the industrial revolution into the 1870s, and to be "cautious" in discussing "controversial" topics, which included the "resettlement of indigenous natives."

"Five years after Chicago's devastating fire, the city was rebuilding and recovering to become one of America's busiest commerce centers. Meanwhile, 1,200 miles away, in the Montana wilds, General George Armstrong Custer led the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry in an attempt to return Cheyenne and Lakota Indians to their reservations."

Most students were not taking notes, and although they weren't talking, they didn't seem to be paying attention to Hatcher, either. Her soft, almost melodious voice lulled him, and within a few minutes, he lost track. The dress code violation

slumped into her desk so her shoulders lowered to the chair's top. He wrote a comment on the evaluation sheet, "Straightforward lecture. No attempt to engage students' attention." He also noted she hadn't given the students a task, like taking notes, nor had she handed out any aids to guide their thinking, like a graphical organizer or an outline template.

Hatcher droned on and on. Salas looked up at the clock. Only ten minutes into the class. He thought about leaving and then returning to watch what she did in the last five minutes, but the room's warmth relaxed him. Several students had closed their eyes. Besides, the waiting papers in his office weren't going anywhere.

His thoughts drifted to what he knew about the Battle of the Little Big Horn: almost nothing. He'd seen a movie with Dustin Hoffman in it years before, *Little Big Man*, that had the battle in it.

Hatcher's voice rose and fell in the background, like a breeze. Salas listened, and he found himself imagining the sun setting behind the low Montana hills. He pictured sitting on a horse blanket, back from the cooking fire. It had been too hot during the day for him to want to sit closer. He leaned against his bedding, his mind drifting. They'd been told not to set up tents, which meant they'd do a night march, another long, stumbling trek in the dark, walking from one desolate spot to the next.

Salas twitched, then looked around the room. Had any students noticed he'd almost gone to sleep? None appeared to be looking at him. Some were in an exaggerated slump mode like the girl sitting in front of him. A couple rested their heads on their arms. Some propped their elbows on their desks and cupped their chins.

Still, Hatcher continued talking. "Single-shot Springfield carbines jammed when overheated," she said, and then went on to horses used as breastworks. Twenty minutes passed. Salas closed his eyes. The pencil in his hand grew heavy, reminding him of a gun stock, how it would feel, its solidity. He propped the gun across his knees, sitting on the ground. In the distance, gunfire, the heavy pop of Springfields filled the afternoon air. Custer's forces, he thought. Custer would drive the enemy back and join them. There were so many hostiles! Even their women were in the battle, waving blankets, scaring the horses away. Did Reno and Benteen know what they were doing?

He took a long, warm drink from his canteen. Other soldiers sat around him, exhausted, frightened. They smelled of dust and horse sweat and days of travel. More

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gunfire to the north, but the sounds didn't appear to be getting closer. A horsefly landed on his neck and bit him. He slapped at it, too tired to care.

Behind the muffled battle sounds and the tired horses' breathing, he heard a bell. He cocked his head. Who would be ringing a bell on the battlefield, in the sun and dirt and waving grass? He regripped the rifle, and it became a pencil, and the dismissal bell was ringing, ending class.

"Tomorrow we will cover the aftermath," said Hatcher. "Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, and the others make for an interesting story."

Salas looked around, confused. Some students appeared dazed too, but they shook it off before heading into the hallway.

Before going home that afternoon, Salas stopped in the school library to pick up a book on Custer's Last Stand, but the books were gone. The librarian said, "It was a massacre. Every source checked out before the first bus left the parking lot. Kids were on the computers doing searches like crazy until we closed."

That night it took a long time to fall asleep. What had happened in Hatcher's class? The experience unnerved him a bit. Had he suffered a fugue or a blackout? He scratched at the spot on his neck where the horsefly had bit him. The insect must have been in Hatcher's room, and he incorporated it into the Custer hallucination, because it left a distinct welt on his skin. When he did fall asleep, screams and gunfire and arrows haunted his dreams.

At the day's beginning, Leanny leaned into his office the same way she'd done the day before. "Did you watch her yesterday? What did you think?"

Salas nodded. When he'd gone over his observation sheet from the day before, he had a hard time remembering what he'd seen in Hatcher's class. If he'd drifted off while evaluating her, it wouldn't be fair to the teacher.

"I'm not sure." He swallowed. "I'm not sure what I learned."

Leanny nodded knowingly. "But you learned, didn't you? Did you know that more Hatcher kids go into education than any other group of students in the building? Talk to counseling. They'll tell you. I'll bet half the History teachers in the district are Hatcher's former students. You want to know something else interesting? Look up Theodore Remmick's grades for this year. He hasn't had a mark above 'D' since sixth grade." She laughed. "I saw him in the lunch detention room yesterday after you talked to him, reading."

Salas checked his to-do list. He needed to observe the other two teachers Wahr had added to his evaluations, plus handle today's parent contacts. He hoped he wouldn't have a schedule buster, but he ended up spending the morning talking to a junior who had started (and ended) a fight in the locker room. Fighting drew an automatic suspension, but the other student's parents also wanted to press assault charges, so the campus police officer visited his office several times, as did the district's lawyer, both boys' parents, the teacher, and witnesses who couldn't agree on even the most basic details.

At one point, the parents who wanted to press charges started yelling at Coach Persigo for not supervising the locker room "in a professional manner." They said they wanted to sue him and the school district.

It took Salas a half hour afterward with Persigo to convince him the parents weren't going to sue. "I've been in the district too long to put up with this shit," said Persigo. "We got a real chance to make the playoffs this year. I don't need the distraction. I can't teach classes, coach baseball, and worry about lawsuits at the same time. No respect. There's no respect."

A false fire alarm cleared the building ten minutes before lunch, which took forty-five minutes for the fire department to respond to, so Salas spent almost an hour

wandering around the practice football and baseball fields with the students and their teachers, waiting for the okay to reenter the school.

Leanny caught up to him as he followed the students back into the building. She walked beside him for a minute without talking. Finally, she said, "Do you have an opinion about the new evaluation forms?"

"They're clear. Fill in the rubric. Add up the score. Teachers know what's expected. Evaluators know what to look for."

"Did you notice there's no measurement like 'Instills a love of learning in students'? It doesn't say, 'Changes students' attitude about the subject' or 'Enriches students' lives' or 'Provides a meaningful adult role model' or 'Creates an environment for student self discovery.'"

Salas put his hands behind his back. Most students were entering the building through the gym doors. They'd piled up to squeeze through the bottleneck, and they weren't in a hurry to get back to class. He and Leanny stopped behind the milling heads. "You can't evaluate those areas. They're subjective."

"Exactly," said Leanny. "How much do you remember from high school? I mean, if you had to take a subject test in any class you took, how would you do?"

Leanny smiled at him, which made Salas think she was leading him to a trap. "Not well, probably. I haven't studied for the tests."

"Exactly, so if you don't remember much, and you can't pass the tests, what was high school's point? Did you get a measurable experience from it?"

Mostly Salas remembered being on the baseball team during high school. He remembered sitting in Algebra, keeping one eye on the clock and one on the cloud cover out the window. If it rained, they'd go to the gym to throw, which he didn't like. In the winter, he did weight room work and he ran. By late February, he started marking the calendar, tracking the days left until spring training. He loved it when the coaches trotted with them out to the field, wearing their sweats and ball jackets. He loved wheeling the trashcan full of bats into the dugout. He remembered stepping onto the freshly swept infield and how satisfying a grounder thumping into the glove's pocket felt.

"I decided to major in P.E. in high school."

"So other subjects for four years were worth it. You discovered what you loved!"

The crowd shuffled forward. In a few minutes he would be back at his desk, trying to do a full day's work in the half day he had left.

"I don't know. Where are you going with this?"

"Just saying the evaluations aren't the whole picture. Maybe high school is more than observable, measurable achievement."

Wahr was waiting for Salas in his office. "We need to move up the schedule on these evaluations. The superintendent wants preliminary staffing done by next week. I'm putting out a note to teachers who are quitting, transferring, or retiring. We still have to cut a position, though. How's Hatcher's evaluation? Did you watch her?"

Salas didn't know where to go in his own office. Wahr partially sat on the desk, so Salas didn't feel like he could sit in the desk chair. He felt like an intruder. "She looks bad on paper. She lectured for the whole period."

"Just like I said. You need to do at least two more observations. We can't move on a teacher without three full observations. Collect her lesson plans and check her students' benchmark test scores to complete the packet."

Salas thought about the class he'd watched. He could still smell the horses at Greasy Grass. "She gave an . . . interesting presentation. Being in her room felt . . . different."

"I don't care if she delivered the Sermon on the Mount. You can't talk to fifteen-year olds for that long and be effective. She's an expensive, entrenched fossil who's teaching like it's 1950. I can replace her with a first year teacher whose salary would be half as much and who would know the latest trends in education."

"She might not be our best choice to cut."

Wahr snorted, pushed himself up from the desk, and said, "I need a name by next week. It ought to be Hatcher, but somehow we've got to trim a position. Make a choice."

Hatcher started the afternoon class with Sitting Bull, but by the end had somehow moved into the Alaskan gold rush. Afterward, when he looked at his observation sheet, he had written "last American frontier," "Jack London," and "Klondike." He hadn't written how she'd begun class, whether the students' learning objectives were on the board, or if she had varied her teaching technique.

As he walked away from her room, though, he rubbed his wrists. They ached and his hands were icy cold as if he had been holding a heavy gold pan in the frigid river's rolling water, swirling and swirling the nondescript sand at the pan's bottom, hoping for telltale color, hoping for a nugget to make the weeks in the wilderness worthwhile. Moving through the hallway, jostled by students going to class, he thought he could still hear the mosquitoes' incessant buzz, and smell the wind coming down from the frozen mountain tops, still snow-capped in the summer's middle.

After school, the librarian said, "Sorry. We had a rush on gold mining books. You missed out again."

Coach Persigo called Salas that evening, just after Salas had settled in front of the television with a sandwich and a beer. The public broadcast station had scheduled an interesting sounding documentary on the Alaskan Gold Rush.

"That kid's parents hired a lawyer. He called me to schedule a deposition. Thirty-five years teaching school, and my techniques are called into question because one immature kid can't settle an argument without hitting another immature kid. Is that my fault? Kids get into it sometimes. Is that my fault?"

Salas gripped the phone tightly. He never knew what to say to a teacher in full rant mode.

"I've got grandkids, Salas, and I don't see them enough. My gutters need painting. I don't have time to waste on a stupid lawsuit."

Salas gave him the school district's lawyer's number. "I'm sure it will come to nothing, Coach. The parents don't have a case. You know how folks can get. A week from now we'll be laughing about this."

Persigo didn't speak. Salas could hear him breathing. The television showed a snow-covered mountain range, and then zoomed until it focused on a lone man leading a burro up a rude trail. A pick and shovel were strapped to the animal's back. Salas longed to turn up the sound.

"You'd better be right," said Persigo. "Life's too short."

Salas met with Mrs. Hatcher at lunch to go over his observations, a mandated step in the evaluation process. She dropped her lesson plan book on his conference table and sat in the same chair students who were in trouble used. Even her hands are plump, Salas thought. She personified softness, like a teacher-shaped pillow, but she gazed at him sharply, and when she smiled her face broke into laugh lines.

"Your lecture interested me," said Salas. "You clearly know your subject area." ("Subject Area Knowledge" was another area on the evaluation, but he wasn't sure how to evaluate her there. Did she *really* know her subject area? He'd fallen into the weird daydream both days, and he didn't know what she'd said.)

"I love history. I think what I've learned most as a teacher in all these years is a passion for my subject." Her voice was just as gentle in person as in the classroom, and she smelled of lavender.

"Yes, that's clear." Salas took a deep breath. He ran his finger down the check-

sheet identifying her shortcomings, which were many. But he couldn't force himself to make a criticism. He had thought this conference would be perfunctory. He'd point out that she ignored the district's guidelines and policies, allow her to say whatever she wanted in her defense, and then be able to say later they had had a meeting, which the union required. He'd done numerous evaluation meetings in the past with other teachers that were no more substantial.

The truth, he thought, is I don't have any idea what's going on in any teacher's classroom. I'm in them such a small percentage of the time. He remembered his first assistant coaching position. The head coach had sent him to the practice field with the freshman boys who wanted to play infield. He was supposed to show them technique and evaluate who could start for the first freshman game coming up in a week. Ambition and idealism filled him. Any boy can learn to play better, he'd thought. They just needed time and the right instruction. He'd worked with the group for two hours, but just before the practice ended, the head coach stopped by to watch. He said to Salas as he left, "Bad technique. It'll be a miracle if they win a game this year."

Salas had been dumbfounded. He'd thought, "But you should see how far they've come! You should have seen them two hours ago!"

"Can I see your lesson plans?" Salas asked.

Mrs. Hatcher pushed them toward him. She'd written little in individual days. This week, for example, included the Chicago Fire, the Battle of the Little Big Horn, and the Alaska Gold Rush. Hatcher had written "1850-1900" and drawn an arrow through the week.

"Not very detailed," said Salas.

Mrs. Hatcher laughed. "Detail's in the head, Mr. Salas. I know what to cover."

"But I don't see your learning objectives. You haven't written the standards you're teaching. You don't write them on the board either. I'm supposed to be able to ask any student in your class the learning objective for the day's lesson, and they should be able to tell me. That's best practice."

"Did you ask them this week?"

"Uh, no, but you never stated an objective. They wouldn't know it."

Mrs. Hatcher picked up her lesson plan book. "The goal is always the same, Mr. Salas. When they leave my room, they know a little more history than when they came in, and they want to find out more."

"It's hardly measurable." Salas felt miserable. This wasn't how he'd planned this meeting. He was on the defensive, while Mrs. Hatcher seemed confident and self-assured.

"Come in tomorrow. Ask the kids at the beginning and the end. You might find it interesting."

"What's the lesson?"

"It's a good one. The wizard of Menlo Park. Did you know, at the same time Custer made his fatal pursuit at Bighorn, Thomas Edison was working on the idea that would become the phonograph? History is seeing connections. Little Big Horn occurs in 1876, the same year H.G. Wells, the guy who wrote *The Time Machine*, turned ten. H. G. Wells dies in 1946, the year after the atomic bomb. Albert Einstein will be born in 1879. So, three years after Custer's men have to use their single-shot carbines as clubs because they can't clear jams from their guns fast enough, the man who gives us the math for the nuclear age comes into the world. Einstein died in 1955. I was a year old in 1955. Einstein, a man who lived when I lived, could have talked to people who remembered Little Big Horn. History's a big story, Mr. Salas, but it's not incoherent. Everything touches everything. That's the lesson."

Salas checked on the lunch detention kids after Mrs. Hatcher left his office.

Theodore Remmick had taken a seat in the back, where he read quietly. He had propped the book up on the desk. At first, Salas thought it was one of the Japanese manga so many kids liked. A bright cartoon image splashed across the book's cover, but when Salas took another step closer, he could see the title: *The Great Chicago Fire of 1871*. The illustration showed a fireman handling a fire hose. He looked panicked.

Principal Wahr met Salas in the hallway outside the detention room. His words echoed in the empty hallway. "Persigo's in your half of the alphabet, right?"

"Yes, I meant to talk to you about him."

"No need. He turned in his resignation. Some nonsense: lawyers, kids fighting in the locker room, and no respect. He's going to finish the year, but he's done. One less evaluation on your plate. Phys Ed averages fifty-four kids a class. We'll replace him, but we still need to eliminate a position. Put your action plan on my desk Monday. I don't want to be messing with staffing while graduation is coming up. Here are the forms you'll need."

He handed Salas a multi-page packet. "Have you observed the other teachers I suggested?"

"This afternoon, if I'm not interrupted."

But the drama teacher reported someone had stolen her purse from her desk, so Salas spent the time going over surveillance footage with the campus police officer. After two hours, they noticed the teacher didn't have her purse when she came into the building from the parking lot.

He only had time to get to Hatcher's class as the dismissal bell rang. Students left her room more slowly than they did most classes, and they had the somewhat dazed expression he now recognized.

"I'm going to the library," said a boy wearing a rock band sweat shirt. "What else did Edison do?"

"Had you ever heard of Tesla?" said his friend. He rubbed his hand through his hair as if to quell static electricity. "Or Henry Ford?"

They both blinked at the lights in the ceiling like they'd never seen them before.

At home that afternoon, Salas studied the teacher release form packet. Since the state had eliminated teacher tenure several years earlier, all he needed to remove a teacher was documented malfeasance, which he'd compiled during the week. He'd complete his third observation tomorrow, during the class's weekend meeting.

According to the evaluation sheet, he'd written damning truths. By observable standards, her teaching failed. She didn't provide learning outcomes. She didn't follow departmental or district procedures. She ignored "best practice," and lectured instead. Wahr had been right.

Salas tapped his pen against the papers, then looked out the window, a little sick to his stomach. The afternoon sun slanted across his front yard. He recognized the five o'clock light, the last light Custer and his men saw. Their heavy fighting started maybe an hour earlier, and as the sun beat down, the men were overrun. He remembered Custer, unhorsed, among the remaining soldiers atop a low rise. No cover. No place to run.

Salas couldn't remember Hatcher talking. He remembered the battle itself. He'd been there. He remembered holding an empty revolver, and he remembered a terrible sadness as men fell, but he wasn't scared. The world grew peaceful at the end, beneath the shouts and gunfire and screaming horses. He became calm when he realized the long fight was over and he didn't need to be scared anymore.

And he remembered, too, riding away, back to the village, triumphant. A warrior among thousands, a warrior to make his ancestors and sons proud.

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On Saturday, Salas walked across the parking lot toward the students. They'd parked their cars near the school, and were now in the graveled overflow parking, far from the building. He heard someone laugh, and they chattered among themselves.

Mrs. Hatcher and Mrs. Leanny, both wearing overalls, were helping the students arrange display boards on the ground. When he reached the crowd's edge, he could see the boards laid out in grids, like city streets, complete with small structures glued to their surface.

"Hi, Mr. Salas," said Theodore Remmick. He wore a ball cap backward, clearing all the hair from his face. "I'm not going to bring it into the school." He held up the propane torch from earlier in the week. "I'm the fire marshall."

"What's the project?" Salas said.

"We need your equipment at the south end, Sean," said Mrs. Hatcher. "When we're ready, start the generator and fan. Theodore will tell you when. Careful you don't step on West 18th."

"I saw so little," said the girl Salas had sat behind his first day in Hatcher's class. Today she wore a bikini top and cutoff jeans. "So much smoke. It choked me." She rubbed her throat unconsciously. "I didn't picture the scope . . ." She waved at the miniature city.

She stepped to the side, and now Salas could see the entire display.

Mrs. Leanny joined him. "Each board represents a half mile, so it's twelve boards long and three boards wide. There's thirty-four kids in the class. Two boards short. Hatcher and I each got to do one too."

Theodore Remmick crouched at the south end, then fired up his torch. A couple of kids pointed cell phone cameras. "It's near nine A.M., Sunday, October 10, in a city of three hundred thirty-five thousand people. In two days, a hundred thousand will be homeless. The fire starts in the O'Learys' barn." He let the flame wash over a tiny building, which caught fire immediately. Several students gasped.

"I saw the fire coming," said a boy holding a camera, but he stopped filming. His hand fell to his side, and his focus drifted. "I was walking home from church with my daughter. At Beach and DeKoven, I smelled burning wood. Smoke rushed up the street. We ran and ran to the Polk Street Bridge to cross the river."

Tiny flames blackened the board's end, crisping the minuscule buildings. The students had labeled the streets. Salas recognized them from the lists in Hatcher's classroom: DeKoven, Meagher, Catherine, Barber. The Chicago River, a blue ribbon, meandered the diorama's length. He saw the bridge at Polk Street.

"Turn on the fan," said Theodore Remmick.

Salas stepped back. The students leaned forward intensely. Talk ceased. Someone sobbed. The box fan pushed the fire across the display. In a few minutes, six scale miles caught fire and burned. Stores, offices, warehouses, homes, bridges, schools and hospitals. When the fire reached the far end, Theodore intoned, "On Monday evening, the winds died. Cut the wind, Sean." The fan rattled to a stop. "And it began to rain."

Students pulled out squirt guns. They were silent at first, and the water streams hissed when they hit the board, but soon they laughed as they put out the fire, squirting each other just as often as soaking the burned city.

"I want to know more about firefighting," said a girl. "What did they learn from this?"

"Did they change the fire codes?" said another.

"How long did it take them to rebuild?"

"Did the mayor get blamed?"

"Did other cities have fires?"

"How much did it cost?"

When Salas left, they were still talking, asking questions, eager to learn. Eager to share what they knew.

Mrs. Hatcher didn't give a lecture. She hardly spoke, Salas thought in wonder. She never taught at all, but it was the best lesson he'd ever seen.

On Monday, Salas handed his recommendations to Principal Wahr. The bald-headed man studied the one-page report silently. Salas let his gaze wander around the room. Organizational charts covered the walls: arrows pointing to boxes, boxes containing names, names associated to duties. It all seemed impersonal. Standards. Goals. Wahr had framed the school's mission: "To lead all students to reach their individual potential by rigorously pursuing and evaluating achievement of high academic and ethical standards in a disciplined, nurturing environment."

Wahr cleared his throat. "This plan cuts your position. You cut your own job."

Salas took a deep breath. "Coach Persigo turned in his retirement papers. Leanny is willing to do the extra work to save a teaching slot, and I think it's time I went back to the classroom. P.E. is where I belong."

Wahr looked baffled. "What about Hatcher? What are your recommendations?"

"You said your son will be going to school here next year, didn't you?"

"Yes. I need to keep an eye on him. Hates school right now."

Salas tried to picture Principal Wahr's boy. Maybe Wahr's son resembled Salas when he was in school. Maybe he acted indifferent and lazy, just as Salas had.

"Put him in Hatcher's U.S. History class."

"Really." The disbelief reverberated in Wahr's voice. "She'll lecture him into a coma."

"I don't think so."

Salas remembered the day's end at Greasy Grass. A desperate people, for a moment, triumphed, but it was a "last stand" for both sides, a proof you fight even when the campaign looks lost. He closed his eyes to see an image that had returned to him since he'd sat in Hatcher's room. The sun set on a swell in the land they would later call Custer Hill. A growing dusk, filled with velvety shade, covered the grass and brush until the details disappeared. No bodies visible now. No dead horses. No broken lances. No battle remnants. Just the stars and the rolling hills and a treeless horizon. The wind pressed his back. A coyote yipped in the distance, and the village dogs yapped in return.

He had lost friends, warriors all, but the enemy had lost many more. They would sing songs about today. They would tell stories to the children's children's children so no one would forget. The victory at Greasy Grass would join the great tales told back to back, the unbroken voice of people speaking.

It had become history.

What happened in Hatcher's room? Hypnotism, magic, time travel?

Salas rubbed the goose bumps off his arms and faced Principal Wahr.

"You won't be sorry your son is in Hatcher's class," he said. "She's exemplary." ○

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# THE PASS

Benjamin Crowell

**Benjamin Crowell's story, "Petopia," from our June 2010 issue was anthologized in *Year's Best SF 16*. After a year spent writing an online textbook on general relativity, he has switched back to fiction mode with a bittersweet tale about life for those left behind by the mass digital upload of humanity.**

**T**he doe startled and bolted, so Chinchy Herrera put her arrow into the buck instead. Instantly she regretted it. It wasn't big for a mule deer buck, but it was still probably double the weight of the doe that she'd intended to take.

She dressed it and then slogged homeward with the hot sun on her back, alternating between dragging the carcass and staggering along with it in a fireman's carry. It would have been impossible except that she was a big girl, and it was a steep drop down through the foothills to the village where Bristlecone, California, had once been.

The men would all want to hear the story of how she'd killed it, as if that was the hard part. Chinchy was a novelty because she was the girl who brought back more meat than any two men combined. Nobody would say, "Chinchy, how far did you have to carry that monster? Does your backbone feel cracked in half?" Not even "I bet your feet hurt." Oh, they'd honor her all right. Give her the big, fatty liver, crisped on the outside and bleeding raw at the center. The thought of it made her want to puke. Sweat dripped down into her eye, and she wiped it on the buck's belly fur.

She had a rope with her, and what she really wanted to do was haul most of the carcass up onto a tree branch. One haunch would be a feast for Mom and the other kids tonight. But that would seem like hoarding, and people would talk. *Just like her father, you know about him.* Actually, Chinchy's father was striding across the earth somewhere in the last days of man. He'd had better things to do than you-scratch-my-back-and-I'll-pick-your-lice-off.

Her feet weren't too bad coming down the sandy part of the ridge. They plunged in with every step, like in fresh snow. But then she got to the rocky part, and her toes started jamming into the front of her deerskin boots. She was considering whether to check for blisters and readjust her load when her hunter's eye caught sight of a man watching her from the shade of an oak tree. She veered toward him, and after a delay he came up to meet her. One of his soles made a flapping noise with each step.

"Want some help with that?" It was a stranger with bad teeth and a sunburn partially hidden by dirt.

"Uh." She let the deer fall to the ground, mainly to make sure she could defend herself if she had to. She'd never met a human she didn't know. It wasn't unheard of, but it was a threat. The usual reason you didn't know him would be that he'd had his ass kicked

out of town and had been circling like a turkey vulture ever since. "I don't know you."

"Yeah, but I think maybe I know you." The man chuckled through his ratty beard. "Thought I might find you up here."

Oh, crap. Worst possible situation. This guy rapes and kills her, and then to cover up his crime he hides her body where nobody will find it—not until her brain has rotted and it's too late to transfer her to the Cloud.

"Hey, don't freak out," he said. Without realizing it, she'd taken two steps back, brought her compound bow down from her shoulder, and notched an arrow. "Heh heh." That annoying chuckle again, nervous this time. "You're Chinchy, right? I'm your father." "The hell you are." *This* couldn't be him. Obviously. No way.

"Mark Herrera, that's me. Sorry I couldn't be here when you were . . ."

Chinchy drew back on the bowstring just enough to feel the cams turn. She'd oiled them the night before with bear fat.

" . . . could you point that thing a little farther away from me?"

"Prove it."

"Okay, that's reasonable. Sure, I can see's how you need time to adjust. It's not easy for you. Prove it, okay." He looked away and pulled on an earlobe. "Do you still have that little paper umbrella? I found that in a bar over by Coso Flats. People took the liquor, but they didn't notice the umbrella. I brought it back for you when you were about three."

The red umbrella didn't open and close anymore, but it was still stored in Chinchy's special box that her younger brothers and sisters weren't allowed to touch. The umbrella went in the box's back corner, underneath the old coin that had Sacagawea on one side and an eagle on the other. If this was really her father, then . . . striding across the earth in the last days of man must have a way of making you not look your best.

"I think I might remember that," she said. "What color was it?"

"Red, wasn't it?"

"I think I used to have something like that, but it was yellow."

"Really? I remember it red. Maybe someone else gave you a yellow one after that."

"I guess you wouldn't know what anybody else gave me, after you took off."

"It wasn't like I wanted to leave, you know. They said I was hoarding, which was true. Killed me out for it. You want to go sit in the shade? How's Carly doing these days?"

"Mom's all right." The sun was hot.

They sat under the oak. There was blood from the deer on Chinchy's shoulder, drying and getting sticky. She shooed away flies. She found out that her father herded sheep, an animal that she only knew about from crumbly old paper books and the know-its. Sheep were what he'd been exiled for hoarding. Maybe the two of them could see each other once in a while, just to say hi. He didn't really seem like a bad person, just not as well bathed as she'd imagined.

"How'd you find me?" Chinchy asked.

"Jenny Shu trades this and that with me, couple of times a year. Supposed to shun me, but she doesn't. She said you been hunting up this ridge the last week or so."

If he'd managed to have regular contact with Ms. Shu, he could have done the same with Chinchy. Obviously the one was a necessity in his eyes and the other a burden—or maybe if she pressed him, he'd offer some rationalization about not wanting to get her in trouble.

"I should get going," she said. The sun was close to the mountains. "I've still got to haul this buck home tonight." She stood up and walked toward the carcass. It was a good excuse to escape, because her father couldn't go into the village. The way to handle the situation was that they were just two people who hadn't talked in a long time, and now they both had to go home. That would show him she was an adult now, and she didn't need him.

"You never asked why I came here today," she heard him say from a distance.

"So why did you?" she asked over her shoulder.

"I'm cashing out."

Cash was a kind of money, like the Sacagawea coin. "What?" She squatted down and thought about whether to carry the buck some more or drag it for a while.

"Transferring."

"Oh yeah?" She stood back up and looked him in the eye. He'd be allowed to come back from exile for long enough to walk through the village and get to the transfer point.

"Yeah, about time for it." He spread his hands. "You can see I'm wore out."

"Mom . . ."

"I don't think Carly wants to see me. After she transfers she's got forever to come by and say hi if she wants." Her father walked up the hill, sole flapping again, to where she was. He put a hand up to shade his eyes. "And Ron, I'm grateful that he took care of you along with his own kids. I was real sorry to hear when he got sick. Tell you what, first thing I do after I transfer, I'll look him up and buy him a virtual drink, or whatever you buy for an old friend when you're in the Cloud. Him and Carly were meant to be together, not like me and her. It's good you and me got to talk, because Ron's going to want to know how everyone is."

They dragged the buck down the ridge together. Chinchy insisted on going in front, so that he wouldn't be able to see in case she stressed out too much and had trouble keeping her face under control. She hauled on the short new velvet-covered antlers, while her father supported some of the weight of the hindquarters using a sling made from her rope that he slung over his shoulder.

They made down off of the ridge and into a canyon that was now shaded from the sun, then met up with one of the Cloud's tentacles where it wound its way up the bed of the creek. It had been a heavy snow year, and there was more water flowing down along the side of the tendril than it could suck up. Sometimes the pink roots spreading out from the Cloud's center reminded Chinchy of tongues, but at this time of year, tight with water, they made her think of tumescent penises. She and her father followed the tube down as it grew from waist- to chest-high, until they reached the edge of the area where the trees had been cleared around the village. Annie Pansegrau was playing in the young corn lilies. They put down the buck, and Chinchy sent Annie to go and tell Chinchy's family to come and pick it up before bears or coyotes found it.

"I don't know if you want to . . ." Chinchy said, not knowing how to end her sentence.

"I'm ready. Let's do it."

They scrambled up on top of the tentacle and started along it toward the center, with her father in front. The strand joined with others, rose and fattened, until they were high enough to see out over the quaking tops of the aspens that grew along the river. The shadow of the mountains was creeping out across the desolate sagebrush plain beyond.

"So," Chinchy said, "you must have done a lot of . . ." *striding* ". . . you must have been some places."

"Here and there."

"Everybody in the village is afraid to get too far from the transfer point, because what if something happens?"

"Uh-huh."

"Have you been to—are there other villages, other Clouds?"

"Haven't gone searching for them. A sheep gets lost, I go after it. A griz took out a ewe a few weeks back, and the flock scattered. You know where the lake is that's shaped like a heart? Island in the middle, stays froze up until May usually?"

"No. I go up to the tree line. Game's not as good higher than that."

"The bear was what made me think about transferring. A grizzly will eat a man, I guess. No point pushing my luck. The rest of the sheep are still up there at that lake."

They got to the top, the huge, pink central bulge that was even taller than the big Jeffrey pine by the railroad tracks. Her father put his hands on his hips and looked down by his feet at the transfer point's orifice, which was a circle a little smaller than a man's head. The protective iris that covered it was translucent, but in the dusk it was hard to see anything inside.

Her father slowly made a complete turn to take a last look around at the world.

"All right, thanks, Chinchy, for coming here with me. I'm sorry about . . . the body—"

"It's all right. I don't mind."

"You've grown up into a fine woman." He put out a hand and they shook. "Guess I'd better do it before I lose my nerve." Without saying anything more, he walked over and lay down on his back with his head on top of the iris. It was nothing like the usual ceremony. No singing, no speeches, no blanket drawn over him. Instead of closing his eyes, he shaded them with a hand.

The iris gradually started to open, the orifice widened a little, and her father's head began to sink into the goop underneath. The hand fell to one side, and his face slackened. People had always told her it looked like going to sleep, but it didn't. It happened faster than falling asleep, and his eyes stayed open. It was more like the way an animal would sometimes just turn wooden after finding an arrow through its heart.

The slime started to go into one corner of his mouth, creeping in slowly so that it was hard to tell whether it was only flowing downhill or consciously finding its way in. There was a hint of a gag reflex, and after that his head slowly sank until it was completely submerged.

Obviously striding across the earth in absolute freedom was a lot less glamorous than Chinchy had imagined. She didn't tell anybody right away about her father. There was always more time to tell something if you wanted to, but once you told it you could never *un-tell* it, and almost certainly everyone would end up knowing.

And if she was going to tell someone about it, what would the point of the story be? She hadn't thought it would be a big deal to go with him to the transfer point and drag the body to the burn pit afterward, but something about it did bother her. It wasn't the physical part, which was less messy than dressing a deer. She wasn't sad that she wouldn't be seeing him for a long time, since she'd never had any real relationship with him. What was gnawing at her was that it had forced her to think about her own transfer. Here in the world outside the Cloud, she had a job and she knew how to do it. If the little kids in the village only had acorns and camas bulbs to eat, they'd get kwashiorkor and end up retarded. As far as anyone could guess, that meant their minds would be that way forever in the Cloud. Chinchy was proud that she did so much—more than her share!—to keep that from happening to the kids.

But what would her job be in the Cloud? Her function here in the real world was to kill things for people to eat. There wouldn't be any need for that after she transferred. What reason would anyone have to respect her, and what would make existence worthwhile? She'd spent her life learning the ways of all the plants and animals that lived in the hills. She understood them better than she knew her fellow humans. What use would that be in a simulated world made out of ones and zeroes sparking back and forth in a mountain of bioengineered cells?

She finally felt ready to tell the story after sexing with Sophie on the sand by the river. They were cuddled up with Chinchy's head on Sophie's shoulder, as if Sophie was the mother bird and Chinchy the chick. Chinchy was a head and a half taller than pixieish Sophie, but somehow they always ended up in this ironic position.

"So he said the sheep were still up there at that lake, and then—"

"Waitwaitwait," Sophie said. She propped herself up on one elbow, which made Chinchy's head feel like it was going to slide off. "The sheep are still there?"

"Yeah, and then we—"

"Oh, baby." Sophie kissed Chinchy's forehead. "Does anyone else know?"

Chinchy sat up. "What?"

"Don't you see what a big deal it is?"

"You planning to go up in the mountains and be a hermit shepherd and never get a bath? I like your smell, but not when it's that strong." She wrinkled her nose. "We're both kind of stinky now. I'm going to wash off again." She went to the water, dove in, and came back up, shivering in the sun as the snowmelt sluiced off of her skin.

Sophie waded in up to her knees and splashed herself, but there was a distant look in her eyes. "Seriously, this is major. Think about how our society works."

"As opposed to all those other societies out there in the world?" Chinchy waded to the shore and got dressed. She prepared herself to listen indulgently to one of Sophie's lectures. Sophie had a lot of time to spend with a know-it. Sophie's mother had transferred as soon as her only child was off the breast, so Sophie didn't have any younger brothers or sisters to take care of. She could read like lightning, faster than a person could talk.

"Your father did exactly the opposite of what he would have been smart to do." She joined Chinchy on the sand and pulled on the fawnskin dress she looked so good in. "He's got these sheep, right? So what does he do with them? He takes them and puts them somewhere that people can't get at them. Well, obviously they see that as hoarding."

"He admitted it was hoarding."

"What's hoarding and what isn't depends completely on how you present it to people. I'm starved, are you? Let's head back." They walked along the riverbank. "So all he has to do is bring one sheep down to town. They're tame, right? Totally docile. So he ties a rope around it and just walks it down, and then they slaughter it and have a feast and everybody loves him."

"Are sheep good to eat? I thought they were just for wool."

"The meat is called mutton. They eat it all the time in the Jane Austen books. But of course you make a big show out of harvesting the wool, too. Give it to some old widow, and there's a way she can . . . what's it called . . ."

"Spin?"

"Right, like Sleeping Beauty. And you can make new blankets and things, and every time someone uses their new wool blanket instead of their ratty old blanket full of holes from before the Wig-Out, they're saying to themselves, Thank you, Mark Herrera."

"So it's his fault, because he could have done exactly what he did, but made people think it was a different thing. You always act like you're smarter than everyone. Maybe it's a good thing that my father wasn't like you, all Machavellian."

"You mean Machiavellian."

"My ancestors had the same genemods as yours, Sophie. My brain just hasn't had as much time as yours to practice multiplication and how to pronounce 'Machiavellian.'"

"Don't get upset, Chinchy. I was just explaining—"

"Well, maybe you shouldn't have been explaining. Maybe you should have been listening. I haven't told anyone else about this. I thought I could tell you about it, and you'd listen and say, 'there, there,' and make me feel better. That's what I'd do if it was you telling me your problems."

"But all I'm—"

"Oh, just shut up, will you?"

\* \* \*

The annoying thing was that Sophie was right. It really would be smart to go and find the sheep. Chinchy spent some time thumb-tapping on a know-it, but it gave her a headache. She understood the general idea of a map. It was supposed to be what you would see if you were a bird flying up in the sky, looking down at the land. There was writing on it, too, which she could read, laboriously, or have the know-it read out loud to her. But that didn't mean that it made sense. *PACIFIC CREST TRAIL. UTM GRID AND 2038 MAGNETIC NORTH DECLINATION AT CENTER OF SHEET. TOPOGRAPHY BY AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHS AND MULTIPLEX METHODS. ONION VALLEY CAMPGROUND (SUMMER ONLY).* Blue was supposed to be water, green forest. But the old dams and aqueducts had been cracked apart by the Cloud's tentacles, and the Owens Valley was no longer sending its water to Los Angeles. And meanwhile the Cloud had dried out some streambeds to quench its thirst, while spitting out its reddish wastes in other places. Where the land had been too wet and boggy for anything but onions and rushes, now it was forested. What had been forest was meadow or sterile granite where the flow of waste had washed away the topsoil.

She needed some help. She decided to go see Gus Chen at the Snowcap Diner on Thursday night. The villagers had turned the Snowcap into a shrine for their best know-it. It was one of the few pre-Wig-Out buildings that was still upright and weatherproof. Gus was just as much of a know-it freak as Sophie, without rubbing anyone's nose in it, and that was why he volunteered to babysit at the Snowcap Tuesdays and Thursdays. The know-it at the Snowcap had a screen as wide as Chinchy's forearm, and its brain was a lot faster than the handheld models, so you could ask it more complicated questions and it wouldn't take forever to answer. Gus was good at asking questions the right way. After they figured out where the heart-shaped lake was, they could go and tell Sophie together. Chinchy would apologize to Sophie for her outburst, but she would have solved the problem without Sophie's help, so Sophie could see that she wasn't the only smart person in the world—or in Bristlecone, which amounted to the same thing.

On Thursday night, Sophie helped her sister Marcie get the youngest kids washed up and ready for dinner. Chinchy told her mother she wasn't hungry and she was going to the Snowcap. She ducked out under the thatch into the gathering darkness and walked up Main Street past the campfires. Jack Nguyen was dangling his short legs off the tail-step of the rusted and skewed old Hino truck where his family lived. He shyly waved an arm clad in baby fat, and Chinchy waved back. Some of the venison had gone to the Nguyens.

At the Pines, lines of yellow light showed through the cracks in the boards that covered the windows. Chinchy knocked perfunctorily and went in. Gus and Sophie were both there, sharing the same torn-up armchair and looking at a paper book. The chair was a tight fit.

"Hey, Gus. Sophie."

"Hi."

"Hi, Chinchy."

The three of them had run wild together. There was no greater freedom than knowing that your parents weren't really sure why they'd had you, and didn't much care if you died, as long as you got dragged back to the transfer point before your brain cells started to rot. They chased chipmunks, climbed cliffs, and dug holes in the mud. Sophie was sexfriends with both Gus and Chinchy, which they all agreed was okay, because sexual jealousy was one of those things that didn't make sense anymore. How could you mate for life, Sophie argued, if you knew you were going to live forever? It occurred to Chinchy, not for the first time, that Sophie's logic worked out especially well for Sophie.

"What have you guys been reading?" Chinchy asked.

"Fantastic Four #66," Gus said, looking flustered. "You want us to clear out? The caretaker is supposed to let users have privacy if they want." He levered himself out of the deep crater in the seat of the old chair. Regaining his usual irony, he said, "I guess we can wait 'til later to find out"—deep, ominous voice—"What Lurks Behind the Beehive." Sophie stood up too, with more aplomb, and smoothed out the denim miniskirt that she'd patched with yellow hibiscus flowers from an old beach towel.

"No, no," Chinchy said, imagining what would probably be next on Gus and Sophie's agenda if they were forced to go out into the moonlight. "The whole reason I came over here tonight was because I knew you'd be here." She explained her purpose. "Looking at the maps on a hand-held know-it is like squinting through a keyhole. And I feel like I need to understand more about how the landscape has changed since the Wig-Out. The Cloud's tentacles suck water and keep it from flowing downhill where it used to, so the heart-shaped lake probably wasn't a heart-shaped lake when the map was made. Most likely it was deeper and bigger. Come on and help me figure out queries." She slid into the booth in the corner where the know-it was set up, with its wires running up through a hole in the plaster to the solar panels on the roof. Sophie and Gus came and stood by the table.

Chinchy leaned over the mic. "Turn on, know-it."

"User: Chinchy Herrera," the voice said through the speaker. Hell, she'd left her preferences set to voice, and now Gus and Sophie would think she was an illiterate dummy. "Bookmarks," the voice went on. "Why a flying arrow doesn't fall down—"

"Stop. Switch to text output, but keep voice input, because I can't type on this keyboard."

A window popped up on the screen. BOOKMARKS: WHY A FLYING ARROW DOESN'T FALL DOWN. THE MAGIC FLUTE. LLAMAS WITH HATS. ARE YOU THERE, GOD? IT'S ME, MARGARET. MORE . . .

"Stop. I want to do a search. Let's start with places within fifty miles of Bristlecone, California." If the sheep were farther than that, it wouldn't be worth going after them.

THIRTY-TWO MILLION HITS.

But almost all of those hits had to be from before the Wig-Out, when there had been a network covering the whole world. "What year did Vons in Bishop stop selling food?" 2066.

"Let's narrow the search to, uh, 2064 and later."

SEVENTEEN THOUSAND HITS

"Now I want to know about stuff up in the mountains."

FURTHER NARROWING YOUR MOST RECENT SEARCH?

"Right."

EIGHTY-SEVEN HITS.

"Give me a random one."

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:—WHY MY LANDLADY, JENNY GARCIERES, IS A BITCH. I AM TAKING CARE OF THIS PLACE FOR MY LANDLADY, JENNY GARCIERES, AND TAKING CARE OF HER CHICKENS, TOO, AND GIVING HER HALF THE EGGS, AND ALL I GET IS THIS RUN-DOWN SHITHOLE. ANYMORE, THERE IS NO WATER OR ELECTRICITY OR GAS OR NOTHING, AND THE SEWER DOESN'T WORK EITHER, SO I CAN'T EVEN USE THE TOILET, AND I WANT TO KNOW WHAT I AM GETTING FOR ALL MY WORK. I AM AT 137 MOUNTAIN STREET, BRISTLECONE, CALIFORNIA, AND ANYONE WHO—

"Stop." Mountain Street had matched the search.

"Suggestion, Chinchy?" Sophie asked. Gus was standing close behind Sophie, and Chinchy's brain conjured an image of Gus's hands on Sophie's hips, then the two of them down on the floor like that.

"Yeah?"

"They used to have rangers. They had uniforms, like soldiers, and when people

would go walking for fun in the mountains the rangers would make sure they didn't get hurt or start a fire or whatever."

"Like police."

"Yeah, so they'd probably be the ones posting about how the water was changing because of the Cloud."

"Yeah, good idea." She tried to think fast. She wanted to set up the question herself. "Know-it?"

"Ready."

"New search, everything within fifty miles of Bristlecone, plus it should be by a ranger or about a ranger, and I want you to sort it backwards in time, so the ones that were posted last, you tell us those first."

"A hundred and twenty thousand hits."

"Give us number one."

WE HAVEN'T HAD NET CONNECTIVITY FOR A COUPLE OF WEEKS NOW. I DON'T KNOW IF THIS WILL EVER GET SAVED PERMANENTLY, OR IF IT'LL JUST SIT IN OUR LOCAL-AREA NET WHERE NOBODY WILL EVER SEE IT.

ANYWAY I THOUGHT I SHOULD TRY, SINCE JOHN'S FAMILY WOULD WANT TO KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM. I CAN'T LOG IN ANYWHERE, BUT THIS IS JULIE GRUETER. I'M A RANGER IN INYO NATIONAL FOREST. JOHN COLASCIUTA WAS MY BOSS AT THE RANGER STATION IN BRISTLECONE. JOHN THOUGHT IT WAS WRONG FOR PEOPLE TO BE RUSHING LIKE LEMMINGS TO UPLOAD, JUST BECAUSE LIFE WAS GETTING ROUGHER AND SOCIETY WAS FALLING APART.

I THINK THAT'S WHY IT HIT HIM SO HARD WHEN HIS GIRLFRIEND SHIZUKO TRANSFERRED. THEY PLANTED A NEW SELF-SUPPORTING BIOCOMPUTER RIGHT HERE IN BRISTLECONE, OUT OF TOWN NEXT TO THE RIVER WHERE IT WOULD HAVE PLENTY OF WATER AND SUNLIGHT. I GUESS IT'S LIKE PLANTING A TREE—YOU JUST DON'T WANT TO PLANT THEM TOO CLOSE TOGETHER. SO BECAUSE OF THAT SHIZUKO DIDN'T EVEN HAVE TO DRIVE TO THE BAY AREA. SHE LEFT HIM A NOTE, SAID SHE LOOKED FORWARD TO MEETING HIM ON THE OTHER SIDE. THAT ATE AT JOHN, AND EVENTUALLY HE DECIDED TO DO THE UPLOAD HIMSELF.

"Stop."

They spent hours trying to construct more elaborate queries, with no success. Society had been cracking to pieces. Who cared about hypothetical changes in the landscape that Bristlecone's Cloud might someday cause? People had imagined the Cloud as a lifeboat, a temporary way of preserving the consciousnesses of the people who would otherwise have starved to death because farmers and truck drivers had stopped doing their jobs.

Chinchy started a fire and made *yerba santa* tea, and then they turned to the old maps. They scrolled back and forth, zoomed in and out, but didn't find any heart-shaped lakes near Bristlecone. The lakes they knew about were all smaller than on the maps, because the Cloud used up so much water. The maps had contour lines that showed altitude, so if there had been an empty heart-shaped valley, they could have found it. But there were no contour lines within the outlines of the lakes, just featureless blue to show where the water's surface had been—when it was higher.

The morning sun woke Chinchy as she lay curled up in the armchair. Gus and Sophie were asleep on the couch together, his arm wrapped protectively around her. Chinchy crept out of the diner with her boots in her hands.

In the distance, at the end of Main Street, the big mound of the Cloud was cold and mysterious in the morning shadows. If she couldn't hold someone's love for a short time on earth, how much more lonely would it be in the Cloud forever?

As spring went on and the snowline retreated, Chinchy started exploring higher and higher in the mountains, and farther away from Bristlecone. There wasn't any large game at the high altitudes, and in any case she wouldn't have been able to drag

it home from so far away, but she set traps and got marmots, pikas, and squirrels. She visited as many lakes as possible, and while she was there she fished for trout. She wasn't bringing back enough food to feed four or five families anymore, but it was enough to make sure her own family had enough fat and protein.

She saw her life as the champion hunter in a new light now. It had all been wasted effort. No, not just wasted but counterproductive. Why work herself to death just so that people could feed more kids? If Ron hadn't died, he and Mom would have still been having babies. How long would it be until Sophie let Gus get her pregnant? What would humanity become if everybody kept on cranking out kids and not even trying to build civilization back up? They'd already lost agriculture. Pretty soon the last know-it would break down, and they'd lose all the old books and music. She imagined a fallen race, living just long enough to breed and then upload into the Cloud, where they'd arrive howling and grunting. If Chinchy could bring a herd of sheep to Bristlecone, she'd be doing something to stop the downward slide.

She found the herd grazing in a little box canyon with sides so steep that you couldn't see into it until you were about to fall in. There was a creek running down it, with a Cloud-tentacle the size of her arm that looked like it had been damaged by frost. It took her most of the afternoon to struggle down through the thick chaparral, with the animals peering up nervously at her. By the time she'd reached the creek bed she was scratched and bleeding all over her arms, legs, and face, and she suspected she'd have a horrible case of poison oak the next morning.

She'd planned to tie a rope around a male and a female and lead them home: a breeding pair, just like Noah's ark. Quickly she found out that her plan wouldn't work. The sheep weren't shy, probably because they'd gotten used to her father. But whenever she tried to separate one from the rest, they all got upset and ran away. They had an instinct to stay in a herd, and if they wanted to evade her, they could, because they could move faster through the brush. In the end, she managed to split the herd in half, driving one half down the canyon. She spent a sleepless night in the foothills with her captives, afraid that if she closed her eyes they would run off.

Chinchy was feted and praised for her accomplishment, and the festivities involved slaughtering and barbecuing a ram. After all, you only needed one ram for breeding, not all four. Adult sheep started to disappear, and people said that was all right because the lambs would grow up. Lambs disappeared, and that was a shame, but everyone agreed that lamb was awfully tender and tasty. Eventually all that was left was a lactating ewe and her one female lamb, and that was a shame, wasn't it? So much for breeding. Everyone disapproved of whoever it was who had eaten the last male.

"So much for your career as an agricultural innovator, Chinchy," Sophie said, as the three of them lay naked and sunning themselves on a rock by the river.

"I'm going to guess what innovator means and agree with you," Chinchy said. In some ways it was easier to get along with Sophie now that they weren't sexing.

"It's pretty inconsiderate of you to have let this happen," Gus said. "People are saying you shouldn't have left half of them up there, or wondering when you're going to go back up and bring the rest down."

"Oh, yeah? Well I've been thinking about it, and that's exactly what I'm going to do, but this time I'm not going to leave them here in town."

"They'll say you're hoarding," Sophie warned.

"They can say that if they want, but it'll be after I'm long gone."

"You're going to transfer?" Sophie asked, with real concern in her voice.

"Nope. I'm heading for the other side of the mountains. Sacramento River delta. It's the world's best farmland, and the river is so big that no Cloud could ever suck it all away."

"I don't get it," Sophie said.

"I think I do," Gus said, and followed up with his Doctor Doom evil laugh.

"You'll die of thirst."

"No," Chinchy said. "The west side of the Sierra is pretty wet, especially when you get up north. I'm going to go through Yosemite Valley on my way out, see if it's as pretty as the pictures."

"You'll starve," Sophie insisted, being the densest one of the three for once.

"Ba-a-a-a," Gus said.

Chinchy found spoor showing that the rest of the herd had headed up the mountain, to where fresh grass was just beginning to peek out of the snow. The next day, Sophie and Gus set out with her to bring the sheep back.

"No, seriously, I think our god is dead," Gus said as the three of them climbed toward the tree line. Sophie was in the middle, and Chinchy, the strongest, brought up the rear to make sure she wouldn't set too fast a pace for the others. This, unfortunately, gave her a nostalgia-inducing view of Sophie's cute little butt in her short denim skirt with the flowers sewn on.

"Come on, Gus," Chinchy said, "the Cloud is as alive as a tree or a blade of grass. I've seen its roots grow into new places that it wasn't in when we were little." They had just stopped for lunch and shared a pipe of dumbweed sitting right in the shade of a tentacle, so Gus's outrageous statement struck her as kind of funny. It was as if Gus, Chinchy, and Sophie had just had a visit with Grandpa, and then Gus had said that there was no such thing as Grandpa.

"What I mean is, its body is alive, but its brain is dead. Anybody *ho-o-o-o-me* in there? Nope, nobody here but us genemodded plant cells."

"If you start a fire too close to it, it smells it and sprays that stuff that puts it out," Sophie protested.

"Sunflowers twist around and follow the sun," Gus countered. "Doesn't mean they know what they're doing."

"If I kick a dog, it growls or runs away," Chinchy said. "Is the dog the same as a sunflower? Maybe it runs without knowing what it's doing."

"Maybe it is the same," Sophie said. "Maybe Gus died yesterday, and from now on whenever he has an audience he'll just knee-jerk the same thing about how the Cloud is dead. Nobody home, pure reflex, like my old great-auntie babbling about airplanes and the president until she was a hundred and ten." Sophie, unlike Chinchy, had remembered that satire was the only way to poke Gus.

"No, it's not the same thing," Gus said with self-assurance. Obviously he'd thought about this a lot already. "Let's say you could make a dog a million times smarter, so its brain worked a million times faster."

"You don't even know what a million is," Chinchy said.

"Sure I do, it comes right after eleventy-seven. Some big number, okay? Doesn't matter what number it's called. So that dog would be smarter than a human, smarter than all the souls in the Cloud put together, right?"

"I don't think a million would be enough," Chinchy said.

"What I'm saying is, if a million's not enough, just pick some bigger number, okay? And say you make another dog super-super-slow, so it takes all day to decide to scratch a flea. You've got these three dogs, normal, fast, and slow, and you can tell the difference. One's a god, and one's dumber than Chinchy."

"Chinchy can still kick your ass," Chinchy said.

Sophie said, "My auntie told me that after you transfer, if you're rich you can make your stream of thought go fast, but if you're poor they give you one second every year to think something."

Gus said, "Right, I heard that too, and that's what started me thinking this way. But here's how you can tell that nobody inside the Cloud is thinking anything at all. You can tell the difference between a slow dog and a fast dog, and that's how you know a dog can think. *But what's the difference between a fast sunflower and a slow sunflower?* None. It does things on a one-day cycle because that's how long it takes the sun to go around the sky. The Cloud is just like a sunflower. There's no difference between a fast Cloud and a slow Cloud."

"No difference you can tell from the *outside*," Chinchy objected.

The bull session threaded its way through calf-stabbing yucca and up past the last pine trees, starved and wind-whipped into krummholzed shapes frozen above the talus slope. The gradual dying out of the trees was paralleled by the tapering of the Cloud's tendrils, until finally the hiking party was in a landscape that could have made a believable twentieth-century picture postcard. If Sophie's auntie was right, then consciousness was a valuable commodity in the Cloud, like the energy that flowed in the sap of a tree. That would be a good reason for the tentacles to climb up into this barren place, trying to fuel themselves by sucking up every last drop of water and ray of sun.

Clouds were flowing from the south and west, drawing over them like a blanket. "Might get some rain," Sophie said, and, as if on cue, a faint roll of thunder came over the mountains. It was getting late in the afternoon. They stopped to drink where a creek splashed into a little granite-bottomed pool, and Chinchy couldn't help ogling Sophie when she got down to drink. After Chinchy took her own drink, she saw that Gus was rubbing his temples with his palms.

"You all right?" Chinchy asked while fishing a ratty pre-Wig-Out cotton sweater out of her sack.

"Little headache."

"The altitude must be hitting you," Sophie said.

"It's not bad."

They resumed their climb, paralleling the creek, but Gus was slowing down, and soon Chinchy was having to consciously moderate her tempo to keep from stepping on Sophie's heels. There was more distant thunder, and a light rain was starting to fall, but a summer-afternoon shower in the Sierra was nothing to worry about. Gus took a long time to get up one steep place, and Chinchy took the opportunity to scan the barren, high-altitude landscape, first by naked eye and then using the scope that she'd removed from her bow. No sheep.

"Rock!" Sophie and Gus yelled at the same time. Chinchy took the scope away from her eye and saw a half-meter boulder tumbling down the slope from Gus's position. When they caught up with Gus, he was nursing his ankle.

"Twist it?" Sophie asked.

Gus flexed his foot gingerly. "I'll be okay. God must be mad at me because I know he doesn't exist."

The rain was falling harder, and the wind was coming up. Gus was wearing a faded and grimy red windbreaker, and Sophie had produced a wool sportcoat with corduroy patches on the elbows. Chinchy shucked her own cotton sweater and stashed it back in her bag, because if it got wet it would be useless for the rest of the trip. In the bag she had a lightweight tarp, a pristine lucky find from the back seat of a car she'd found two years before, half-full of mud at the bottom of a gully. Wrapped up in the tarp were three sleeping bags, each cinched up in a raggedy old trash compactor bag. The sleeping bags would at least take off some of the chill, even though the insulation had gotten wadded up into clumps over three or four generations of use.

"If we can find some place that's flat and not so exposed, we can pitch the tarp." Uncomfortably, she imagined sleeping huddled together with Gus and Sophie. Who would go in the middle?

They started back up, following a ridgeline. Something pinged Chinchy on the head, and she looked up reflexively to see where the pinecone had come from. But of course there were no trees up here. It had been a hailstone, not a pinecone. The stones, as wide as Chinchy's pinkie, clattered on the rocks around them. Hail in July!

"Ow!"

"Look at that stuff coming down!"

A searing flash strobed the darkening landscape, and then, with almost no pause in between, came a crash that rattled their bellies as much as their eardrums.

"Okay," Chinchy said, keeping her voice calm and authoritative, "that was close. Let's keep moving and get through that gap up there, and then we won't be the highest thing sticking up and attracting lightning." A lightning strike could fry your brain like a duck egg. There wouldn't be anything left to transfer.

Gus took off fast uphill, slipping and sliding on the hail-covered rocks, falling down and picking himself up. The wind had picked up, and the sleeves of his red windbreaker flapped like flags. Chinchy wanted to tell him to pace himself, but there was another lightning strike, right near her. After a while she realized that she wasn't standing and needed to get up—and then by the time she'd regained her feet and shaken her head to clear it, Gus was too far above Chinchy to hear her voice.

"You all right?" It was Sophie.

"Yeah, let's just keep moving."

The hike turned into a scramble. Chinchy concentrated on staying sure of her hands and feet, testing rocks to see if they were solid before she put her weight on them. It was still hailing, and the stones were getting in her hair and inside her shirt. A lightning flash cast light into a little crevice in front of her face, and she saw that hail had sifted in and filled it up. She realized that she needed to keep track of Gus, and decided to keep her eyes on where she thought he was, so that when the next lightning flash came she could pick him out.

Without warning, there was a bang, and the mountainside lifted itself upward, leaving Chinchy behind. Something slapped her in the shoulder, and then in the head.

"Chinchy?"

"What?"

"She's come around."

"I'm fine. What are you talking about?" Chinchy was cold and wet.

"Chinchy, that gap was a pass over the mountains. We need to get down. You got a concussion and you fell in the creek. All the sleeping bags are soaked. Can you walk?"

"Course I can walk. Why is it so dark?"

"It's dark 'cause it's night-time, you dope," Gus's voice said. The lack of creativity in the insult wasn't like Gus, and there was something funny about his voice, a burbly sound like he was underwater. "It's cloudy so we got no starlight."

"Gus—"

"—I'm just—"

"—let him—"

"Shut up!" Chinchy yelled, and they did. She tried to sit up, but her face hit something. The tarp. It was going *fwuhp-fwuhp* in the wind. "Let me up."

Immediately she wished that she hadn't said that. Gus and Sophie had been holding down the two windward corners with their hands, shielding the three of them from the weather. The hail had turned to freezing rain.

"All right," Chinchy said, "I'm ready. Sorry. Let's go."

"We don't know which way it is," Sophie said.

Chinchy was incredulous, and it took a while for Sophie to convince her. There were two directions they could go down, and they didn't know which was which. They had a compass, but it was too dark to read the dial. Meanwhile she noticed that Gus wasn't saying much. She grabbed one of Sophie's soggy corduroy elbow patches and pulled her aside.

"What's up with Gus?"

"Altitude sickness. Besides the lightning, that's the other reason we've got to get down."

"Is it that bad?"

"You heard his lungs. He keeps throwing up, and a lot of what he says doesn't make sense. He kept falling down." She must have been scared to death, with both Chinchy and Gus messed up, but she wouldn't show it.

Distant lightning faintly lit up the pass for one instant. Chinchy saw the two possible ways down, and Gus curled up in a ball. "Want me to pick?" she asked Sophie softly.

"Might as well."

"You guys couldn't tell?" she said loudly. "It was that way." She pointed randomly in one of the two directions—not that anyone would be able to see her arm or her finger.

Gus couldn't walk more than twenty or thirty steps on his own without falling down, so Chinchy and Sophie had to put their arms around his shoulders and hold him up.

There were times when not just Gus but all three of them fell down, and those times got closer and closer together. Finally, one of these times, Chinchy landed in a crevice between two rocks, and she felt an irresistible urge to burrow into the rocks to stay warm.

Cold and darkness. She must be in the Cloud, and it was nothing but a cold, dark emptiness that would last forever.

Chinchy's head was downslope from her body, her right cheek in water and sunlight coming in through her eyelids. Reluctantly she opened her eyes and saw that her face was lying in the shallow edge of a puddle that was covered with a film of ice except where her body heat had kept it thawed. She tried to get up, but found herself wedged in place by a rock at her back and a human body pressed against her legs and hips. When she dropped her chin against her chest and clenched her teeth and turned her eyes as far down as they would go in their orbits, she saw Gus's shoes and the top of Sophie's head. Sophie stirred and groaned.

Gus had spent the night sandwiched between Chinchy and Sophie, which was good because that would have kept him warm—but Chinchy realized guiltily that Sophie had been the one most exposed to the wind. Chinchy and Sophie stood up, but Gus was a small man-sized rag doll full of rocks. His head lolled, but his breath still wheezed in and out of his chest. Chinchy and Sophie tried half a dozen ways of carrying or dragging him before finally laying him on his back, head down-slope, and dragging him by his arms. The sky was just starting to lighten, and the narrow valley they were descending was still in shadow.

The exertion warmed up Chinchy's blood, and her blood started to heat her brain above the animal level. She almost tripped over a finger-width pink tendril with its tip lying in an ice-covered mud puddle. Sophie saw it too, and they laid Gus down gently.

"So we came down the right side?" Sophie asked.

Chinchy shook her head and tried to think logically. "Which way's the sun?"

They staggered around like two meshed gears, squinting at the narrow strip of overcast sky.

"I think it's brighter on that side," Sophie said. "The sun's over that ridge." She

pointed to the side on their right and then clasped her arms around herself again for warmth.

Chinchy tried to figure out what that meant. At the moment she didn't feel smart enough to count to ten. "So we're headed north? That doesn't make sense. The tentacle should be coming up from the east."

"We must be going down a different way than we came up."

"But as long as we follow the tentacle, it'll take us home for sure. After a while it'll turn to the right, maybe after we get out of this valley."

"I guess that's right," Sophie said uncertainly. "I hope it didn't get up here by growing straight up a cliff or something."

It started to snow, and they couldn't see very far. They followed the sickly looking tentacle, which was covered with scabs and scars. This valley must have been at the very highest altitude where it could survive over a winter.

The tentacle joined up with another one and fattened to the diameter of an arm, and then it started to veer to the left.

Not to the right.

When they put Gus down so they could rest, Chinchy checked the compass and silently showed it to Sophie. They were headed downhill to the west now. They'd crossed over to the other side of the crest of the Sierra.

"Shit," was all Sophie said.

There was no other choice but to follow the tentacle downhill. Late in the afternoon it met up with the remains of a narrow dirt road and continued downhill, hugging an eroded groove in the dirt. As they descended, the tentacle got fatter and healthier, the air got warmer, and stunted trees started to appear. The road became better defined, the trees got bigger, and then the road turned into crumbled-up asphalt with yuccas growing out of it. The snow turned to rain.

As it was getting dark, they came to a tent cabin with a fallen pine tree lying on top of it that had torn half of the roof to shreds while leaving the other half intact. They dragged Gus across the threshold and over against the wall on the dry side, then slumped down, exhausted, next to him.

They had a fitful night's sleep, bundled up in the tarp with Gus in the middle of the sandwich again. His breath was mostly shallow, but once in a while he would wake Chinchy and Sophie by taking a deep, shuddering gasp. Whatever the altitude had done to him, he didn't seem to be getting over it. Would he get better if they brought him down low enough?

Chinchy was the first to wake in the morning. The rain had stopped. She took a thorough look around the cabin, and what she found disturbed her. There was an ax with a carbon-composite handle and a well-sharpened stainless steel blade. Why hadn't such a valuable artifact been found and salvaged before Chinchy was born? Mixed in with the dirt and leaves and useless junk were three or four other items that should have been scarce and prized, including two still-sealed bottles of wine and a set of four wine glasses, three of them perfectly preserved. The cabin wasn't hidden. It was right next to a road. Someone should have found and looted it a long time ago.

She went out with her knife to see if she could find a chipmunk or a marmot, but only managed to stuff her pockets with miner's lettuce. As she came near the cabin, she heard Sophie's voice singing an opera aria. She remembered when she and Sophie spent an evening together on the roof of the Pines Diner listening to the know-it play back the Vienna Philharmonic's performance of *The Marriage of Figaro*, with pauses for plot summaries and English translations. (Gus liked jazz and blues and rock and roll, not opera.) The men would kiss the women's arms and sing about how

sexy they were. Afterward, Sophie could effortlessly sing back every number. (If that was a genemodded talent, it was one that hadn't found its way into Chinchy's chromosomes.)

She sat on a rock for a few minutes and allowed herself the luxury of listening to the beautiful sound. Sophie sang a slow, sad number, then a lively one. Finally Chinchy got up, walked a hundred paces away from the cabin, turned around, and approached it again, this time without using her hunter's skill of stepping quietly. The singing stopped before she got to the door.

"Hey, Sophie. Sorry, hope you weren't worried about where I was. I figured you guys both needed the rest."

"No, that's all right." She was fussing with the tarp, which was tucked around Gus. She'd hung the three wet sleeping bags up on the wall to dry. "He's still breathing, but that's about it."

"We just need to get him down lower."

"He's a lot lower already." Were those tear-tracks on her cheeks?

"Do you think he can drink?" Chinchy asked. "I could take one of those wine glasses and fetch some water."

"We shouldn't dick around. He needs to transfer."

Chinchy tried to focus on the fact that Gus was one of her two best friends, but she couldn't keep another thought from scratching at the door of her skull. Things might be different between her and Sophie if Gus transferred—and Gus would be safe and happy in digital paradise, no harm done.

"If he can drink, he should," Chinchy said.

"Yeah, sure, but that's not the main point."

Chinchy tried to put her own feelings aside and think about what Gus would want. "Well, it kind of *is* the main point. He thinks there's nothing after you transfer. It's stupid, but that's what he thinks. If you buy that, then all that matters is making him have the best chance of coming alive again in *this* world."

"Gus says all kinds of nonsense he doesn't believe. Everything's a joke for him."

"So you're saying just transfer him, even if it's not what he said he'd want?"

"No, I'm . . ." Sophie turned toward the cracked plastic window so Chinchy couldn't see her face.

"What?"

"If we transfer him . . ." Her shoulders were shaking. Chinchy wanted to hold her and comfort her, but she couldn't do it.

"If we transfer him, what?"

She turned around, and tears were streaming down her face. "If we transfer him, I'll never see him again!"

"But—of course you will—someday—"

"No, because we have to transfer him in *this* Cloud, and I'll be in the other one." She ran out the door and into the forest.

CEDAR CANYON, CA. POPULATION 270. ELEVATION 2900 M.

The entire post office, along with part of the adjoining Ski 'n' Climb Mountain Shop, had been tipped onto its side by the tumefying pink center of the Cloud's root-ball. There was a broken-up skeleton of a dog or a coyote in the street, but no human remains so far. At the post-office door, Sophie tilted her head sideways and laboriously read a notice that had almost faded into illegibility.

"It says even though . . . tra . . . transportation is wiped out, everybody should just stay calm. You can transfer here, because they've got their own self-supporting . . . biocomputer as a lifeboat, or you can try to hike out and transfer in Vi-sa-li-a. If you upload to the lifeboat, your consciousness will go really slow, so you'll barely even no-

tice that time has been passing while you wait for all the lifeboats to get linked up to the net . . . network. After that your consciousness will get uploaded to the operation center at Yucca Mountain, and you'll start thinking at full speed again. It'll be like going to sleep and then waking up again."

They dragged Gus to the apex of the rootball, where a human neckbone was sticking out of the orifice that had swallowed the skull.

"Son of a bitch," Sophie said, and looked away.

Chinchy's brain initially put it in the same category as the carcass of one of the many animals she'd killed and butchered for food. It was hard to see it as the used-up shell of a human being who was still alive, somewhere in this other Cloud. She couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman. Would that person care that crows had picked at the flesh he no longer had any use for?

"They all went in," Chinchy said. "Every single one."

Sophie turned around. "I guess if you're the last one, there's nobody left to drag your body to the burn-pit."

"Maybe our town is the only one that isn't normal. Pretty stupid, right? Why fuck around and have babies when all you have to do is go to sleep and wake up, and all your troubles are gone."

"Just a nice little nap." Sophie folded her arms and didn't look up at Chinchy.

"Well, I guess we better do it." Would it be safe to pull the skull out? She'd had to pop her father's head out, but it had been smooth and covered with flesh. A skull would have sharp corners. Was there a risk of tearing the iris? Maybe it would be safer to cut the neck bones apart. After all these years the joints were probably barely hanging by a thread. She should find an excuse so Sophie didn't have to see her do it.

"No," Sophie said.

"What do you mean, 'no'?"

"It's Pascal's wager. Gus told me about it."

"Yeah?"

"There were two philosophers called Blaise Pascal and Terry Pratchett, and they got in a bet. I forget which one took which side. The point is that if you're risking your chance of living forever, you have to bet whichever way you think has the bigger chance of letting you live forever, because nothing else matters."

"Uh-huh?" Chinchy looked down at Gus, whose tongue was sticking out of the corner of his mouth, and tried to imagine him having this big philosophical conversation with Sophie. Chinchy and Sophie had *The Marriage of Figaro*, and Gus and Sophie had Pascal's wager. Go figure.

"So this Cloud is just a lifeboat, and so is our own Cloud back in Bristlecone. They were supposed to hook up with the mother-ship in. . ."

"Yucca Mountain."

"Right, but obviously that's not going to happen."

"How do you know?"

"Because obviously they screwed up, that's how. They thought these were going to be *lifeboats*." She spit the word out like a sunflower seed. "They weren't supposed to last for year after year, and they *won't* last for year after year. Maybe a hundred years go by, or a thousand, and then these Clouds get sick. Some kind of mold starts growing on them, or an animal evolves that can eat them, or whatever. The thing is, these two Clouds can't get over high mountains. If they try to grow over high mountains, they die back in the winter."

"You don't know that for sure. We don't even know where Yucca Mountain is. Maybe you can get there without going over mountains." Chinchy picked Gus up by the collar of his shirt and started dragging him toward the orifice.

"Right," Sophie said, "but you never know anything for sure. That's the whole point of Pratchett's wager."

"Pacal's."

"Whatever. Put him down, will you?" She got between Chinchy and the orifice and pushed her away from Gus. Chinchy staggered and fell on her ass, barely saving herself from an uncontrolled slide down the side of the tentacle. "Will you just listen?" Sophie said. "So the thing is, these two Clouds have a pretty crappy chance of surviving forever. But if Gus wakes back up, maybe he heals up, finds out where Yucca Mountain is. He goes there, uploads, lives forever."

"I've never heard of Yucca Mountain. It's got to be really far away."

"Yeah, but Gus has at least some chance of getting there before his body dies. It's probably a bigger chance than the Cloud has of stretching a tendril all the way out to Yucca Mountain. And then he gets to eat chocolate."

"What's chocolate?"

"It's something you eat, the best thing to eat that there ever was. They used to have it in the real world, and they can make a digital kind in the Cloud."

Chinchy thought about it. "But you're assuming the two Clouds just sit there while mold grows on them, or mutated futuristic chipmunks take bites. The Clouds are smart, they've got smart people inside. They can react to what's going on."

"That's what I would have thought. But look at that skeleton."

"What about it?"

"If you were dead, would you want your body to sit there rotting like that, with maggots and worms eating it? I sure wouldn't. I'd say, 'Yo, Cloud-buddies, could you please deal with the outside world enough to do something with my carcass? Swallow it down, or smooch it under a tendril, or *something*? It hurts my feelings to know that my old self is out there rotting and smelling bad.'"

Gus couldn't take water. When they laid him on his back and poured a sip into his mouth, he started to choke horrifyingly. His skin became like paper, and his eyes sank into their sockets. Sophie and Chinchy kept him out of the sun and weather, made sure he was warm at night, and steadily dribbled as much water into his mouth as they could without making him gag.

On the morning of the third day Gus's breathing stopped and his heartbeat faded away. They transferred him into the foreign Cloud and climbed back over the pass to Bristlecone. The next day, without warning anyone, Sophie transferred.

Chinchy found the sheep a few weeks later and drove them down to a lower elevation where she could keep an eye on them. It was autumn now, much too late in the year to start her trek to the Sacramento Delta. Word got around about the other Cloud where every soul had transferred without leaving anyone behind. There was a rash of transfers as some people in Bristlecone decided that the people in Cedar Canyon had it right: why *should* anyone spend another cold winter on Earth?

It was a light snow year. Spring came early, and the snow began to melt. Chinchy was out hunting one day when she came across the tentacle that reached up along the route they'd taken last summer on the ill-fated hike. But now the tentacle was huge. It had fattened up so much that she could only climb up onto its back by dragging a log up to it to use as a ladder. She traced the pink track upward with her scope toward the pass they had discovered. She camped on the tentacle's lee side that night and in the morning she followed it upward. Its tip was almost to the pass—much higher than she'd ever seen a tentacle grow before, higher than it could possibly overwinter.

She climbed up to the pass, and at the saddle she found another pink tentacle growing up from the western side. ○

# NEXT ISSUE

## APRIL/MAY ISSUE

April/May is another one of our jam-packed double issues. We've somehow managed to cram two gigantic novellas into this one issue with room left over for a host of terrific short stories. Our cover story is **James Patrick Kelly's** stand-alone sequel to "Men Are Trouble"—his Nebula nominated tale of an Earth where aliens have expunged all the men. Now the women are about to find out what will happen at "The Last Judgment." The exquisite details in **David Ira Cleary's** huge new novella may make you think you really are "Living in the Eighties."

## ALSO IN APRIL/MAY

When you pay a visit to the bustling space station in **Ian Creasey's** new story, be sure to leave room in your bags for "Souvenirs." While eagle-eyed readers may notice that we're running **Tom Purdom** stories back to back, next month's tale couldn't be more different from our March cover story. Set in the near future, Tom's April/May tale will allow you some quiet time to start "Bonding with Morry." **Josh Roseman** shows us why even in the future, neither the grass nor your next relationship may be "Greener" on the other side of the fence; **Sandra McDonald's** "Sexy Robot Mom" displays some amazing fortitude and perseverance; baseball season is upon us in Rick Wilber's "Something Real"; **Gray Rinehart** makes his *Asimov's* debut with a fast-paced story about a "Sensitive, Compartmented"; and **Carol Emshwiller** tells a lovely tale of revelations revealed while "Riding Red Ted and Breathing Fire."

## OUR EXCITING FEATURES

**Robert Silverberg's** discussion of a concert suitable for Roger Zelazny's *Slow Kings* in April/May's *Reflections* identifies why some music must be played "As Slow as Possible" and **Norman Spinrad's** "On Books" comments on some "Alternate Realities"; plus we'll have an array of poetry and other features you're sure to enjoy. Look for our April/May issue on sale at newsstands on February 28, 2012. Or subscribe to *Asimov's*—in paper format or in downloadable varieties—by visiting us online at [www.asimovs.com](http://www.asimovs.com). We're also available individually or by subscription on *Amazon.com's* Kindle and Kindle Fire, *BarnesandNoble.com's* Nook, *ebookstore.sony.com's* eReader and from *Zinio.com*!

# PATAGONIA

Joel Richards

Joel Richards has published one novel, *Pindharee* (Tor), but is mainly a short fiction writer. His stories have appeared in *Asimov's*, *Amazing*, and in a number of original anthologies, including *Universe*, *Alternate Generals II*, and *Warriors of Blood and Dream*. In recent years, the author has hiked and kayaked across New Zealand and Patagonia. He reports that he has not had the sort of encounter related in the following story, but that he would have liked to.

I am sitting in a small coffee house in a small seaport town in a small country. This is not Patagonia at all. That comes later. The coffee shop doesn't seem to have a name; the town is Skagen; the country is Denmark. What does matter is that I'm at a table with a smart and very attractive woman who is interested in me. That will not happen in Patagonia unless I travel with a woman. Excepting tourists, there aren't that many women there—though I don't know it yet. I met Bente at the Skagen fish auction. This was not the likely outcome of an urban adventure that started with the 5 AM sounding of my alarm and a walk—a cold one, even in September—across dark city streets to an unassuming warehouse. I'd have never found it had I not followed a slow-moving forklift carrying a weathered pallet topped with chipped ice. I gambled that there were fish under that ice, and was right. There were aisles of fish, eels, crustaceans grouped by lot. Some were beautiful, pink or red with spots that looked like floral blooms. Some specimens, whiskered and with outsized mouths, seemed weird, but none seemed ugly. Buyers from restaurants, inns, and fish markets from all over Jutland stood around, many with cell phones to their ears. Others were taking pictures of the fish with their smartphones and sending the images to their bosses. These were the younger guys. The older ones had older phones—clamshell types. They looked like they made their own decisions on what to buy and how much to pay, and were telling their establishments what was on the way for their menus and display cases. A few tourists and townspeople stood watching. There were some fishermen who would sell a single fish to a customer or friend looking to buy dinner. Clearly, I was not one of those. I had no place or means of cooking such a dinner. But Bente did. We got to talking. She was cheery, chipper, pretty, and spoke English. All Danish women her age spoke English. She had added a Brit accent as an au pair in Manchester. I spent a few seconds guessing how long ago that was. She looked about thirty-five now.

Eventually we ended up in a bakery/coffee house, along with a whole flounder

now in fish wrap, resting besides her coffee cup and *weinerbrød*. It looked big enough for two, and I harbored the hope that she'd ask me home to share it.

However, Bente wanted to talk about the Skagen painters, that group of plein air, Impressionist influenced artists that sought the luminous light and the backdrop of sea and dunes that denoted Skagen in the late nineteenth century and into the early twentieth.

I had mentioned Michael Ancher's renderings of fisherfolk back at the auction. Bente had shown surprise that an American would know of them. Perhaps that—rather than my looks—had brought her here, looking at me over her coffee cup. She asked me which one was my favorite.

"A tough one," I answered. "My favorite painting is Krøyer's 'Hip, hip, hurra.' That crowd of partygoers, young and old, raising their glasses around an outdoor table. The men's bearded exuberance, the golden sparkle of champagne flutes and the sunlit blond hair and white dresses of women and a little girl. That's the essence of a summer day with friends. Right up there with Renoir's 'Luncheon of the Boating Party.'"

Bente nodded approvingly.

"But my favorite painter? Maybe Ancher. His women walking the beach at the borders of the surf, their parasols holding off that same light that illuminates them like secular saints. I feel a strong affinity, even a tropism to those people—the seafarers, the artists, their subjects, that way of life. It was with me, never leaving, as I walked those beaches."

Bente understood this. She had lived here her entire life, except for her years at Copenhagen University and in Manchester. She worked at the local secondary school, teaching biology to university-track students.

I poured the last of the coffee from the silver pot between us. No dinner invitation had been forthcoming. I wouldn't let this interlude come to an end without asking if I could see her again.

She took her time, running her glance over my face.

"I like you," she said. "You have a sense of place and your part in it—the interaction of place and person. But now we're talking about person to person. I'm in a relationship, one I value. Also one on a cusp. I've got to deal with that without the pull of another attraction, another potential about to happen. So maybe in a future time."

I was disappointed, but saw the opening.

"Would that be a future Skagen?"

"Elsewhen and elsewhere. If it happens. Do you feel the pull of any other place on earth?"

Actually, I did. That was an easy one to answer. I had a framed photograph in my study, a self portrait by Galen Rowell from the back, arms akimbo with a wind-blasted tree in the foreground and himself facing the snow laced massif of Torres del Paine. Like Skagen—sun and light.

"Patagonia," I said.

She looked at me intently.

"My great grandfather shipped out of Skagen to Valparaiso, around the Cape. I have his journal. I read it often." She paused. "Good choice. Let's talk on this the next time we speak."

She wrote down her contact information, squeezed my hand, picked up her fish and was gone.

We got to know each other better over the years that followed. Skype was our mutual best friend and go-between. Bente was playful and mischievous, very open in the bantering aspect of herself. She also had an interior and introspective side that she guarded with circumspection. Over time she let me in. I learned more of her for-

mative years (as a banker's daughter; who would have guessed!), then at a boarding school in Ribe. Afterward came the Copenhagen University years, studying biochemistry. I learned a little—again that circumspection, which I respected—of a diminishing love for a long time friend, rekindled on her return to Skagen, that would eventually lead to a stressful parting two years after our post fish auction breakfast.

Then some time in healing, some of which I got to see and possibly help advance, and then a time for moving on. She viewed me—for starters—as a prospect.

I had been an able and willing way station in her progress. I hoped to become something more, but kept that thought to myself.

We decided on a trial run and some fun. We settled on a world as far flung from either of our homes as could be found.

Patagonia. There are lots of images. Check out the many calendars.

My iMac wallpaper is of that same Torres del Paine peak as the Rowell photo. The image is spectacular, but no computer display can tell the story. The essence of Patagonia is the word *vast*.

Larger than Texas. More outsized than Alaska. At least seeming so. Open spaces ridden by lenticular clouds, stacked to the edge of the stratosphere like flying saucers about to lift off to the only larger frontier imaginable.

Winds that bend trees to the horizontal. Stand in them long enough and you become a stunted topiary version of a man.

Patagonia is wild. Not Africa wild. You don't go to Patagonia for the animal life. There isn't much. Guanacos—a relative of llamas—and some birds. It's a tough living for large predators. A few pumas can subsist on the land's slim pickings (like snow leopards in Nepal), but not many. You're not likely to see one.

Same with people. No indigenous tribesmen here. Early settlers of a murderous nature plus the usual epidemics of typhus, pertussis, measles did them in. Those early settlers, mainly Scottish and Welsh sheepherders, were often solitary frontier types who weren't too eager to talk with visitors. Their descendants a bit more, but few people make the trip to mix with them or the Hispanic Argentines and Chileans.

It's the openness, the monumental scale of peaks, glaciers, and cloudscapes that does it.

Bente and I knew all that, so we planned a few days in Buenos Aires to get to know each other and our up-close compatibility in the more encouraging trappings of a vibrant city. My Peace Corps Spanish would—hopefully—enhance the experience. There'd be plenty of people and culture as a backdrop and counterpoint should our mutual attraction not carry over. Actually, we weren't too worried about that. Those years of Skyping had pretty much convinced us that we'd travel well—and intimately—together. That turned out to be true.

The physical attraction maintained, even intensified. For our first night we had booked dinner at 11 PM and then a late evening at a tango club. We had both taken lessons at home, and had bought clothing for the occasion. Sharing an Argentine beefsteak was a starter in sensuality. The first turn of tango on the dance floor, with Bente's silk sheathed thighs between my tight pant legs, took sensuality a quantum leap further. We ended up in bed at 4 AM, and ratcheted up the heat by my taking off those stockings one at a slow time. We didn't leave bed till the next dinner.

By the time we reached Patagonia four days later, we cared little about other people or the lack of them.

Natural splendors, yes.

As we worked our way south we hiked forested—often wet—trails to mountain lakes on the moraine of the Fitz Roy. We traversed flinty trails across high rock faces, studied with fossils of trilobites, hard-to-believe evidence of a terrain once underwater. We

skirted glaciers, and walked on one (the Viedma) with crampons, viewed the Perito Moreno Glacier calving from head on, surveyed others across canyons and from higher elevations so that one could see that those massive ice pinnacles that made up a glacier face were each individual point scouts in an army that loomed and inched its way for unbroken miles of ice. We crossed into Chile to the vertical rock spires of the Torres del Paine, piercing with their peaks cloud towers that reached to double their height. And we ended far south, at Tierra del Fuego, the ends of the earth.

Tierra del Fuego was different from the Andean Patagonia that we had left behind. It had its mountains, but my strongest impressions were of the forests that marched down to the beaches and rocky seashore, the lakes and bogs that made up the most accessible interior. We stayed in Ushuaia, but did most of our hiking in the valleys carved by rivers spanned by rough bridges, often enough washed away (or at least washed over so that their logs were several inches below the surface). On our next to last day, a drizzly one, Bente opted to wander the town's outskirts. I engaged a guide for my farewell hike through the peat bogs and gorges. A couple of missteps had sharpened my resolve to not fall or get lost while out alone.

That was a good decision. Mist had settled in the valleys we traversed, dampening even the rocks above water level. On the way back, the last arc of a ten mile loop, I did fall while fording a small but boiling stream, soaking my pants legs and shoes. We were wet and cold, and in no shape or mood for any further side excursions. Joaquin told me that there was a store/drinking hole along the trail. He warned me that it was not oriented to the tourist trade—what little of it there was in this bog country—but to the local sheepherders and small holders of the area. Its main appeals were a fire, which never burned down, and the proprietor's white lightning, which never ran out. Both sounded good.

The place was ramshackle enough, looking as if it might fall down at any moment. This did not seem quite so likely as we got closer. The supporting timbers, though roughly planed, looked as solid as massive tree trunks, which likely they were. The siding, though, and the planking of the outside porch and stairs seemed less maintained. No doubt they were not considered as important to the integrity of the building.

We negotiated a path past the rotten stretches of the planking, which Joaquin seemed to know. I'd probably need his guiding services on the way out if the proprietor's white lightning was as potent as promised.

The fire, in a blackened hearth, was burning vigorously, its flames seeming the only semblance of movement before me as I surveyed the room. A threesome of coarsely dressed locals sat around a square table. The place was warm and smelled of wet wool. Shelves of possible foodstuffs, probably past their shelf life—if that concept had any sway here—lined the wall behind a timbered counter that nonetheless had a polished top that mirrored a tin lantern hanging above it. Other shelves and wicker baskets held work gloves, farm implements, fishing gear and the like.

One of the men at the table rose as we entered, and walked behind the counter. He had glasses set out and a bottle produced before we'd said a word.

Joaquin introduced the proprietor as Abuelo Juan. The abuelo nodded and poured.

White lightning tastes the same the world over. Its distinguishing markers are its smoothness and its kick. This was surprisingly smooth. It didn't seem like a stream of lava coursing its way to my stomach. But I had the idea that the kick would be world class. This would turn out to be true.

I complimented Abuelo Juan on the character of his brew. He raised one eyebrow almost imperceptibly. Whether it was in acknowledgment of my compliment or surprise at the caliber of my Spanish was anyone's guess.

He suggested we take off our outer coats to dry by the fire. He had probably not

seen Goretex before. Nonetheless, in the acceptance of hospitality, I took him up on the offer.

He left us then to drink in peace, and went back to join the couple at the table.

I figured I'd better temper the drinking with talk. First priority was Bente. I took my smartphone from my pack, and asked Joaquin if he'd mind. He said no.

End of the world or not, Ushuaia was a hotbed of Patagonian technology. It boasted three thousand mobile phones at last count. Even out here reception was good.

"Hey, babe," I said. "We're wet and tired, but we're on the way back."

"Where are you?" she asked.

"Hold on," I said, and turned to Joaquin. "Where are we?"

"Nowhere," he said, and smiled. "But an hour's walk from town."

"No name," I said to Bente. "A drinking and warming station. An hour's walk once we stop drinking and warming."

Bente laughed. "Call me when that is. I'm still out taking pictures."

"Isn't it raining?"

"Drizzling. That makes for good pictures. Call me when you're on the road again, and I'll head for the hotel."

I took another small sip. I was trying to pace myself. The proprietor was back before I had finished my glass.

"The gentlemen at the table want you to join them." He paused. "One of them says that he senses something between you, a pull." He gestured somewhat aimlessly. "I do not know the right word."

He paused again. "I have never known him to speak to a stranger. He is Yamana."

My turn to raise an eyebrow.

"Tell him that we would be honored," I said. "We will join them in a moment."

"Joaquin," I said after Abuelo Juan had moved off, "can he be Yamana? I thought the last of them had died in the early 1900s."

Joaquin shrugged.

"Real Yamanas have plenty of reasons to distrust the white man, and not reveal their origins. Others have claimed to be Yamana but may not be. Or are part blood. Some want to trade off the tourists with that. I knew one such Felipe in Puerto Williams, many years ago." He stopped to consider. "I do believe that he was Yamana."

"And those gentlemen there?"

"I do not know them."

"Would you like to?"

"I would like to. I do not think they will try to sell you anything."

We went over to their table. We were greeted courteously and asked to sit. I set my phone down beside me in case Bente should call.

One of the pair turned his gaze to his glass after those few words, and kept it there for much of our conversation. The second man was old. His face was brown and creased. He had been outdoors all his life. His people, he said, had considered their canoes their home, carrying fire with them wherever they paddled, though he and his father and his father before him had given up canoes and lived in a fixed abode.

He certainly looked Indian, of a sort, though his cheekbones were higher than most I had seen.

His Spanish was good. His talk was mesmerizing. It ranged from accounts of times past to tales of a life of fishing with twentieth century gear. He may not have known or cared about our sense of reckoning that called these times the twenty-first.

And then . . .

"I knew when you came in that you are not of this land. But you have been here before. I feel it."

"I am certainly from another land," I said. An uncomfortable moment loomed. I did

not want to contradict this man. A certain vagueness of reply was in order. "But I do not remember visiting here before."

"You will remember," he said.

We talked on. I can hardly recall what more was said. The voice, though—I can recall its soothing cadences, its unhurried unraveling of some greater tale.

At last I looked at my watch. I was amazed at how much time had passed.

"I do not want to seem impolite," I said. "But I must call a friend and then go. She is waiting."

He nodded. I made the call, we said our farewells, and left.

Joaquin was mostly silent on the way back. That was okay with me. I had much to think on, and I wanted to keep the sound of the old Indian's voice reverberating in my ears.

Bente gave me the bathtub first. I needed warming more than she did. Afterward, while Bente showered, I checked my smartphone for messages and photos of this day's hike that I could share with her. I found a file I hadn't seen before. It was a video recording labeled *Yamana*.

Puzzling. I opened it and let it play.

It was a recreation of my time with Joaquin at the warming hut, not taken by me. It was taken by Joaquin, as he let me know in a brief introduction, and it was at the behest and a gift of the old Yamana. But after those few words, it was me talking. And speaking Danish.

I can now recognize Danish, maybe read a few street signs and such, but not talk it.

But I was speaking Danish, earnestly and at great length. After I finished, I heard a few words in Spanish, in that compelling voice of the old Yamana. I could understand the words, but the meaning was discomforting.

It was all I could do to keep myself from barging into the shower and dragging Bente out. She emerged eventually, drying herself in front of me, taking her time.

"Close to your last look for awhile," she said. Erotic mischief was her middle name.

I managed to show enthusiasm, distracted though I was. When she had her clothes on I handed over the phone.

"Tell me what you make of this."

She watched and listened. Her face went from puzzlement to agitation. She walked over to the desk.

"I don't want to summarize this," she said. "I want to write it down, every word. It'll take a few run-throughs. This isn't modern Danish; there are a lot of archaisms. Then I'll read it to you. Then we'll talk."

She took her journal out and started writing. I cannot say enough how weird it was to hear that voice, undeniably mine, again speaking a language I don't know.

Still sitting at the desk, at a remove from me—perhaps a man she thought she knew but now knew otherwise—she said, "Listen to this," and began reading.

"I am Peder Høst, twenty-five years old and second mate on the brig *Mette-Jan* out of Skagen in this year of 1862. We have doubled Cape Horn on our return leg from Valparaiso. and have mended our sails and tarred the ship's standing rigging from the mastheads on down. But our anticipation of the long run home across the Atlantic is dampened when we put in to Montevideo. Our captain accepts a commission from a Uruguayan merchant who holds the timbering concession on a small unnamed island at Tierra del Fuego. What we call Fireland. We are to sail south again to the Strait of Magellan and haul the lumber cut by the crew he had landed there six months before.

"A disheartening prospect, but not as daunting in the particular as the outlook from the quarter boat as I and my crew near the island. Three canoes have put out from a hidden cove as we pull for the beach, and they are not manned by timber cutters. Even at a remove I can see nothing but bronze skin and no clothing.

"The boat slows as the oarsmen slack off.

"Lay on your oars, and long strokes!" I command. We are three hundred meters from the beach and thrice the distance from the *Mette-Jan* astern us, at anchor and unable to come to our aid. It is but a small sliver cut out from the Skagen stock, but it may be the last of Skagen that I shall see.

"I cock my pistol.

"The canoes are around us and upon us. There is no sign of life from the rough work sheds on land, though a curl of smoke rises from behind a palisade of ten foot high pointed stakes surrounding other buildings still.

"The Firelanders are stark naked, wearing not as much as loincloths. They carry spears, some short hafted, as for throwing. I order two of my boat crew to belay rowing and take up their guns.

"Do not fire before my word," I order.

"The men look at me dubiously. Captains and first mates are appointed by the ship owner. A second mate is but a step above a seaman, and can be sent back to the forecastle and one of the sailors promoted to the mate's place at the captain's pleasure. I face a test of my position. Perhaps of the lives of us all.

"The natives have seen guns before and surround us, but at a distance. They keep up a constant hurrah, shouting at themselves and at us. And brandishing their spears.

"It is impossible to tell who is their leader. They are unpainted and unadorned, as well as lacking clothes.

"Guns or no, they head us off and force us to give way or ram the canoe direct on the larboard bow.

"What do they want?" Knudsen mutters beside me. 'And who speaks for them? They are as like as a flock of terns and as loud.'

"A Firelander stands in his canoe, a wicked looking fellow with a slice out of his right ear. He points at Knudsen and makes tearing motions at his chest.

"If that devil wants my heart, let him carve it out with a ball in his belly," Knudsen growls, his fingers tightening on the stock of his weapon. I stand and lay a restraining hand on his shoulder.

"Give him your shirt," I say.

"Knudsen looks at me agape.

"Give him your shirt!"

"I take the gun from Knudsen's paralyzed fingers. Slowly Knudsen pulls off his shirt, a brightly checked affair. We toss it over, and the native snares it adroitly on the point of his spear. He pulls it on and capers, as much as one can in a dugout canoe, then turns to me, standing in the quarter boat's stern. He points to his nether regions and to me.

"He wants your pizzle, Mr. Høst," Knudsen says with a grim smile.

"I look down at my white duck trousers, newly fetched from my trunk, and cleaner than the tarry ones of the deck hands.

"I pull down my trousers and toss them over. With a whoop the Firelander snags these, too. Another series of hoots and yells and the canoes veer off, leaving us to ourselves and the beach ahead.

"No one comes forth to greet us on the strand. The timber cutters are barricaded behind their palisade. They have cut precious little wood, and live in a constant state of fear. Yet we are amazed to learn that not one has been harmed by the natives. The Firelanders' fierce display alone, coupled with the woodsmen's own indolence, has

daunted them and paralyzed all initiative. The Montevideo merchant will not be pleased.

"We row back to the ship, where I am greeted with howls and ribaldry as I clamber over the rail in my drawers.

"I relate the events of the expedition to the captain.

"A pair of trousers seemed a fair price for safe passage," I conclude. And to the first mate, who had guffawed as loudly as the rest, "At least their chief now has a pair, and we will know with whom to reckon!"

"Well done," the captain says shortly, and gives me a brief nod as he turns away. He had not guffawed nor even smiled during my account of the confrontation.

"And yet a good laugh awaits me in my turn. The next day I have the deck watch and stand by the ladder as the ship's boat approaches. The first mate returns from his landing party ashore without *his* trousers.

"How can this be, Mr. Mathiasen?" I ask when he is aboard with his safety but not his pants. "Is it not all bluff, or did you also reckon your trousers a fair trade for your hide? And wasn't their chief wearing mine?"

"They were all naked as boobies," the mate growls. "Very fierce. A different crew altogether."

"No sir, Mr. Mathiasen," pipes up Knudsen, who had been in both crews. "It was the same rascal as took my shirt and Mr. Høst's trousers. Half an ear gone, and I'd like to slice off the other."

"I look at the mate.

"A clever fellow," I say. "He clearly reckons on us thinking them all alike without clothes. In this manner he shall accumulate a whole sea chest of sailors' gear and can ship out with us on our next sailing from Skagen."

"The crew laughs and hoots. But not at me."

"He says something in Spanish at the end," Bente said. "What is it?"

"He's saying that this is me."

She cocked her head.

"I think he's saying that I'm not channeling some other person," I went on. "He doesn't have the words for that. But it's what he means. He's saying that me here and what we're hearing of me then and there, it's all the same. One construct, spanning time and physical manifestations."

"A rebirth of souls?"

I scanned her face for skepticism or amusement. I didn't see any.

"That may be too much of a metaphysical reading," I said. "He doesn't say that. It's certainly the retrieval of a past life memory in his eyes. There's a continuum—that's the template. The individual ego and its bodily housing is transient. So are our lives, then, now, and in times to come."

"Lives to come," Bente repeated.

"You're a scientist," I said. "I gather you find that hard to believe."

"Not all that so. When I was in Copenhagen I worked at a lab that was testing exotic

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organic compounds from marine life offshore of Kenya. They were screening for organics with pharmaceutical qualities, pharmaceuticals that they could possibly synthesize. One field of investigation was compounds that could fit receptors in the hippocampus and amygdala—areas involved in the laying down and retrieval of memories stored in the temporal lobes. A fair amount of Alzheimer's research is aimed that way."

"I doubt that they're thinking of past life memories," I said. "And that's what we're dealing with here."

"True. But sometimes you get something other than what you're looking for. We may be talking of an organic compound, possibly an indigenous ingredient of Abuelo Juan's brew, that could bond with receptors to retrieve such memories, assuming that they exist. Couple that with a skilled shamanic facilitator with hypnotic abilities, and we may get a regression to something new and unexpected."

"We could be getting false memories, or worse—a hallucinogen."

Bente smiled. "A hallucinogen didn't transform you into a speaker of nineteenth century Danish."

It was clear to me that our last day in Tierra del Fuego must include a trip back to Abuelo Juan's shanty. Later in the day, I figured, as the old Yamana—if he had any routine at all—was most likely to be there near day's end.

The weather was sun swept, but with those towering cloud formations. Bente wanted to take more pictures, and I accompanied her. She took some of me. When I viewed them later I marked my distracted, absorbed, even vacant expression.

I was much more focused when I said goodbye to Bente and hit the trail on the backtrack through the woods. It was pretty plain that direct questions, or even a hint of the confrontational, was not going to get me anything productive. The best I could hope for was to nudge the Yamana toward directed rambling.

I took a deep breath on the threshold, pushed open the door, and strode in.

Yesterday's tableau lay before me. The same trio was again at the table. The only difference was the absence of the smell of wet wool. The prevailing odor now was that of stale foodstuffs.

Of course, to this group there was another difference. I was here, but without Joaquin.

I walked to the counter, where the proprietor joined me. He produced the bottle and glass. I ordered a beer instead. Then I laid out the one line I had rehearsed.

"Would you be kind enough, Señor, to ask the gentlemen if I might join them again?"

He nodded, went over to the table, and after a few words that I couldn't hear, beckoned me over. On this occasion he joined us, taking the chair that Joaquin had sat in the day before.

The old Yamana regarded me with an expectant equanimity, and said, "*Buenas tardes.*"

I responded, and after a short pause, I said, "You told me yesterday that I had been to this land before. I answered that I did not remember such a visit. I think that I remember it now."

"It is good that you do," he said.

It was my turn to nod.

Some time went by before he replied.

"I recognized you."

"From yesterday?" I asked. A fatuous question. He must realize that I knew better, but was offering him an opening.

"No," he replied. "From a time before."

I considered.

"Can you tell me more about that time?"

"I can only help you with what you know already."

"Do you know what I was saying yesterday about that time?" I asked. "It was not in the tongue we speak today."

"I did not know those words, but I knew what you said."

He then went off on a ramble that any eavesdropper to the conversation would have thought a general commentary on those times of two hundred years ago. There was much on the making of dugout canoes, what it was to consider such a vessel as much a home as a means of transport. Then more on eating habits, the climate, the note that the Yamana went naked in those days because bare skin was warmer than wet clothes.

Of course, he concluded, there were those rare times when exotic garments unexpectedly came their way, and they could have some fun joining the world of the clothed.

He was looking at me head on. His eyes had a playful glint, and his lips a slight upward curl at the corners.

And that was all I was going to get. He returned once more to his monologue that was about not much of anything, but that brooked no interruption.

Eventually I said my goodbyes and left.

Our flight to Buenos Aires was uneventful. We had reserved one last interlude in that remarkable city for our farewell evening. We'd had the foresight to book our flights home for the late afternoon of the following day, leaving time for dinner, an early AM visit to our first night's tango club, an urgent and intense last session of bed, and even a few hours of sleep thereafter.

Bente went back to Denmark. We'd had a fine time together, with an unlooked for dive into a deep pool.

We're becoming ever closer through frequent contact. We will travel together again, and we believe that our relationship will deepen. There is something that binds us to each other, more so as the years roll and lives wear down. The lives we live today.

Perhaps the lives to follow. ○

## Sonnet I



How cold is space, that dark and hollow night,  
Which holds in velvet hand the jewels of God!  
At Man she laughs, not joyous but in spite.  
For man, too small, has strayed where none had trod  
And homes not meant for Man's abode has claimed  
On Mars' red earth in frozen land of storm,  
In Lunar waste, on cratered plane, sea-named,  
And flying fast round worlds of gaseous form,  
Or launching forth in deepest night to stars  
Unnamed, unknown, unclaimed and farther flung—  
But Man, his pride, his lust, it knows no bars  
And going on he comes to skies unsung.  
The night, she calls, and men, they come pell-mell.  
But what the worlds they'll find—Delight or hell?

—A. Walker Scott

Tom Purdom tells us, "I'm doing my bit to keep up with all-important advances in technology. I now read books exclusively on my Nook; I've managed to force reprints of several of my stories into the right formats for the Nook and the Kindle (which isn't as easy as Amazon and Barnes and Noble say it is); and I've added a Nintendo Wii, complete with zapper, to my game systems." While all of this activity is absorbing a good deal of his attention, we're glad he put some time aside to fashion an exciting new adventure tale about dangerous miscommunications, daring escapes, and . . .

# GOLVA'S ASCENT

Tom Purdom

They didn't know he understood their language. They thought he was just another speechless creature—a large *cat* in the semantic categories that shaped their thinking. He could have spoken to them in their own language when they captured him. He had known he could save himself if he let them see he could speak. He had been afraid they would kill him on the spot. But he had been brave. He had swallowed the words swelling in his mouth. He had pressed his tail flat against his leg, so it wouldn't betray his feelings.

The two humans eyeing him through the metal gate in front of his stall looked like they might be a male and a female. The probably-male was taller, with bigger shoulders. The probably-female looked slighter and seemed to have broader hips. Golva had only seen two humans in his life but they had displayed the same differences.

"He raises questions," the slighter one said.

"Zoological questions?"

"He's got claws like a carnivore. But he doesn't look particularly strong. And I gather he wasn't very fast."

"He didn't put up much of a fight. They were going to shoot him on the spot but he just stood there. Backed up against the barn. Watching them."

"He let them throw the net over him?"

"Will decided to get a net. He says the thing didn't do a thing when he moved in on it."

"Like it knew what the rifles were?"

"It can't be the thing that builds the towers."

"But it could be something that recognizes weapons. The creatures that build the towers could have something that looks like a rifle."

"Like crossbows. . . ."

Golva knew he wasn't thinking clearly. His head had felt strange ever since he had come near the top of the plateau. There was something wrong with his breathing, too. He had to think very carefully before he did anything.

The tall one was named Detterman. Golva had heard his three captors say they were going to call Detterman when they dragged him into the barn. Detterman seemed to be called Amel, too. One of them had called him Amel when he had hurried through the barn door. They called the woman Leza and Doctor Sanvil. Doctor sounded like it might be a title, the way they said it. The language they were speaking was called English. The humans had hundreds of languages, according to the things he had been taught, but the humans on the plateau spoke English.

"Have you tried feeding it?" Doctor Leza Sanvil said.

"You think it needs meat?"

"That seems like the best place to start. It would have to be something native, of course. I'll see what I can trap."

"We could just kill it, Leza."

"I recommend we give it a little observation time first. It's obviously wandered up from down below. We may as well see what we can learn."

Golva was lying on the dirt with his head resting on his forepaws. He was doing his best not to look at them like he was listening and understanding.

They weren't going to kill him right away. He wouldn't have to reveal he was a talker just so he could tell them he couldn't eat their food.

But what would they do when they did learn he was a talker? Would they torture him? Would he have to tell them things that would endanger everyone he had left behind in the forest? He had felt adventurous and daring when he had slipped away from his friends and kin. He had launched a hunting song at the sun when he had looked down on the forest from the edge of the great plateau. No itiji had ever stood where he was standing.

Now he just felt lonely.

And afraid.

And very young.

He had looked down on the forest from a perch that was so high you could have put eighty of the tallest trees between the edge of the cliff and the green treetops below. He could look across a span that covered all the ground he had traveled in the last three days.

No itiji had ever climbed so high. They knew this strange uplift existed but the cliffs and the unshaded sun had daunted any adventurers who might have wondered if any gods actually lived on its broad top. The tree people might have climbed it, but they were too busy building their cities and fighting their wars.

The sun had beat on him as if it was aiming all its light at his head. He had started the song as a paean of defiance and triumph—No one had ever been this high! No one had ever seen this sight!—but it had sounded lonely before he finished.

His mother had made him promise he would tell her when he went off by himself, but she had gone off with a huntband that was foraging for a wedding feast. It might be days before anyone realized he was gone. Everybody knew he came and went.

*You live inside yourself,* his mother had told him. *Sometimes you make the rest of us feel you hardly know we're here. But you can't live inside your own skin. We need each other.*

Harold the Human said there were other humans on the plateau. He said they came from another world—another *planet*. He said they had machines that moved by themselves and weapons that could reach ranges that were ten multiples of the ranges you could reach with dartblowers and bows.

And Harold had told the truth. Golva had seen the machines moving in the flat open spaces the humans had covered with strange plants, closed shelters, and structures that were so puzzling they looked senseless. He hadn't seen them use their weapons, but the things they had pointed at him had looked like the *guns* Harold had described.

The female was carrying a bag when she came back. He was certain she was female now. He could see all the differences he had noted when he had looked at Joanne, Harold the Human's wife.

"So what are you?" Leza said. "Why did you come wandering up out of the forest? Why would you keep climbing?"

Golva had risen to a sitting position, with his weight resting on his rear haunches. He was certain she was talking to herself—thinking out loud in front of a speechless animal. He was watching her, but a speechless animal would have watched her too, wouldn't it?

"Let's see how smart you are, kitty. Let's see if that oversize round head means anything."

She placed the bag in front of the bars. She picked up a tool with a long handle and pushed the bag between two bars.

Golva had smelled the bag as soon as she had stopped in front of the stall. What would a speechless creature do?

He stared at the bag and offered the woman three exaggerated sniffs. He edged toward the bag on stiff legs, the way he had seen prey animals approach lures, and sniffed again.

His stomach clenched. He could pick up a whiff of fresh blood through the odd odors surrounding the bag.

"Let's see what you do with the bag, kitty. Can you figure that out?"

The bag was made out of something smooth and glossy. The tree people made bags out of animal skins and vines they wove together, but this was something else.

What would an animal do? Would it claw at the material? Would it tug at the drawstring that held it shut?

His stomach gave him another reminder he hadn't eaten since he had swatted two fish out of the river that bordered the area the humans had occupied.

What difference would it make if she did realize he was a thinker? She still wouldn't know he could understand her language. It might even give them a reason to keep him alive.

He rested his right paw on one loop of the drawstring. He bent over the bag and the top opened as he tugged at the string with his teeth.

"Very good. Very good indeed. Now let's see what else you can do. . . ."

They hung his next meal from a rope draped over a hook on the ceiling and attached one end of the rope to the bottom of the gate. The woman hit her hands together and told him he was a *very smart kitty* when he chewed through the rope and leaped on the meat when it dropped to the floor. They closed the big door at the front of the building and set up mazes created from boxes they arranged in the center aisle. They placed a box in the stall and watched him push it toward the wall so he could reach the food they had placed on a high shelf.

The bag had contained a small animal that resembled a tunnel digger Golva's family ate when they needed a quick snack. The woman called it a *field rat*, which indicated this version might scurry around above ground. It was almost as bland as the tunnel digger, and left him just as hungry, but it was the only thing they fed him.

"It's a skimpy diet," Doctor Leza said. "Given his size. But we have to keep him hungry. To maintain a constant motivation."

He had studied the length of soft metal that held the gate shut. They ran it through the bars and twisted the ends together—a simple matter for creatures with hands. He had braced his front paws against the gate and pulled on the metal with his teeth but he couldn't make it untwist.

And what good would it do if he did open the gate? He would still have to break through the main door. And evade the guards who would come after him as soon as the invisible alarms roused them.

On the third day she brought him a pair of live field rats. She pushed a small cage into the back of the stall and watched while he herded the rats into a corner. The cage snapped open all by itself and he jerked his head around and eyed her while he held the rats in position.

She raised her hand and showed him the thing she was holding. "That's right, kitty. I can make things happen from a distance. I press the little button and zappo! Up goes the cage door."

He studied her as if he was trying to understand the situation. He should have looked at the cage, not her. Wouldn't an animal have looked at the cage?

She shoved the thing into her pocket and turned away. The animals in the next stall grunted at her as she passed and she gave them some words.

Golva's paws flashed. His claws raked the field rats with the swift, merciful strokes his parents had made him practice until they felt he could join a huntband without raining disgrace on his forebears.

Doctor Leza had returned with Amel/Detterman and another male. "The cage was right where it is now," Doctor Leza said. "He had the field rats over in the corner—where he could see the cage out of the side of his eye. He had to know the cage opened. But he turned toward me."

"It looks like he's given himself a nice little snack."

"It wouldn't mean that much by itself. But when you add it to the other things . . ."

"You've been the person who's been setting everything up. He knows you're the chief instigator."

"He didn't even glance at the cage. I didn't know what he'd do. I set it up so he'd be focused on something else. So he wouldn't have his guard up."

Amel/Detterman was holding a gun in one hand. Golva couldn't read their body talk yet, but the male always looked relaxed—as if he knew he could live with anything that happened.

"So you think he's smart," Amel/Detterman said. "But we don't know how smart."

He raised the gun. Doctor Leza sucked in a breath. The other male stepped behind her and put a hand on her shoulder. He was bigger than Amel/Detterman but he tended to stay a step back—as if he was somebody who was there to give Amel/Detterman support.

"I'm not going to kill him," Amel/Detterman said. "I just want to see how he reacts. It's loaded with shot. I'll hit him in one of his paws if he doesn't do something informative."

Golva stared at the gun. He didn't know what *shot* was, but he knew what a pain in his paws felt like. Would he be able to walk? Would he be permanently crippled?

He was alone. He wouldn't have friends and kin who could help him hunt. He would have to hobble on three legs if he tried to escape. . . .

The front end of the gun was pointing at his chest, a little to his left. He had always been good with numbers. He wasn't as good as the very best number thinkers, but the rules made him feel good—like certain kinds of singing. He didn't know how fast the shot would fly but at this distance he could assume zero travel time. He could see the path it would follow. He could see the man's finger on the trigger, like the trigger of a crossbow.

The noise shocked him. He would have been paralyzed if he hadn't already started rolling to one side. Angry somethings rattled around the stall.

He hopped to his feet, back stiff, eyes fixed on the man. His head was still ringing but his instincts had taken over. The end of the gun was swinging toward him. He couldn't stand there and hope he could clear his head before the gun roared again.

"You watched my finger. You're watching it now. You're a very smart little creature, aren't you?"

"Don't kill him."

"Why not? Wouldn't you like a look at his brain? You already know he's smart. What else can you learn?"

"We don't know what's down there in the forest. We don't have any idea what he is."

The gun thundered. Golva held his position, knowing it was aimed to one side, and the man's finger twitched again. The noise hit him while he was still reacting to the first blast and he backed up before he could stop himself.

Doctor Leza had stepped away from the stall. "What are you trying to do?"

"You've got your tricks, I've got mine."

"He knows you aren't aiming at him. Can't you see that?"

"And he knows what it can do. I can see that, too."

Amel/Detterman handed the gun to the other man. He jerked something that looked like a small stick off a fastener on his belt.

"Watch him. Don't shoot him unless it looks like I can't handle him."

Fingers untwisted the metal catch. The gate swung open. Amel/Detterman stepped inside.

"This doesn't make any sense, Amel."

Amel/Detterman's mouth curved upward—the expression humans called a *smile*.

The little stick leaped into a rod twice as long as the human's arm. Fire shot through Golva's body. His front legs collapsed. The stick touched him again. Another burst of flame racked through him. Words sprang out of his mouth.

"*Stop. Don't. Don't.*"

"He likes to hurt," Doctor Leza said. "He'll come back if I don't give him what he wants. I got him to go away but he'll come back."

Golva stared at her. He had arranged himself in a sitting position but his legs were still quivering. Amel/Detterman had given him two more bursts of fire before he left.

"We now know you can talk," Doctor Leza said. "You apparently know our language, incredible as it sounds. And we know somebody on this planet built the wooden towers that poke above the trees. We spotted those towers as soon as we took up orbit—if you know what that means. So we seem to have two obvious hypotheses. You learned our language from the only humans you could have met. And there may be two intelligent species native to this planet. One like you. And one that can build things."

Golva lowered his head. The tree people didn't like it when you looked them in the eye without a break. Were the humans like that, too?

"I don't know how well you understand our language," Doctor Leza said. "Three words don't tell me very much. But I think you can understand the questions I just raised. Did you learn our language from the two people who left our little settlement? Are there two intelligent species on this planet?"

She was talking very softly, evenly. She wasn't shouting the way Amel/Detterman had. He could guess the meaning of *hypotheses*. *Intelligence* meant the ability to think. That seemed to be an important divide to humans. Most itiji split the world into talkers and creatures who couldn't talk.

"Why won't you talk to us? I can understand why you didn't tell us right away. But why won't you talk to us now? We just want to know more about the world below us.

Did Harold and Jo tell you we come from another world—another planet? Do you understand that?"

She dropped to one knee and pushed a bowl under the gate. "Why don't you take a drink? I'd want some water if I'd been through what you've been through."

Golva eyed the bowl. The water shimmered in the light that glowed in the spheres hanging from the ceiling.

"Do you have a name? Can you at least tell me your name? You can call me Leza. The man who flamed you is called Amel—Amel Detterman."

He raised his head and tried to look determined. He could hold his legs steady if he stiffened the muscles.

She pulled the bowl back. "I'm going to leave you. We just want to know more about your world. You can talk to me or you can talk to Amel. I just want to know more. He has other interests."

*Have no fear, tiny child. Have no fear. Sleep in peace. Have no fear.*

He had still been a cuddler, lying beside his mother, with legs that hadn't learned to walk, when he had first heard the child's song from the Song of Oro Lar Orona. His mother had crooned it to him while he pressed against her side. His father had joined her in duets when he was lying near.

Oro Lar Orona had been captured by the tree people when his own first child had been a cuddler. Oro and two of his huntfriends had just made a good kill, according to the song. And high above them, in the trees, a party of tree people slave takers had trailed them as they hunted. Dartblowers had pricked them with darts tipped with paralyzing poisons. Oro had been hauled into the trees in a net. His huntfriends had been yoked to sleds and driven away by the whippers riding on each sled.

The tree people had crouched on branches beside the net. "You will tell us where your wives and children lie," the leader of the slave takers said.

Oro knew they had marked him for this trial because he was smaller than his huntfriends, and not as clever. Their dinner had almost slipped past him when it had charged in his direction. He had slowed it with a clumsy slash at its hindquarters and the fastest runner in their trio had headed it off before it could limp away. When people talked about Oro they always said he tried hard. Most of the food at his wedding feast had carried the claw marks of his huntfriends.

In the song of Oro the words of the slave takers were always sung in the high modes, in imitation of the shrieking voices of the tree people. The descriptions of Oro's responses were sung in Middle Resonant. There were no speeches in Oro's sections. The slave takers hung the remnants of his body from a branch and his wife sang the children's song at the end, when the slavers had given up and gone away.

Why hadn't the slavers merely hunted for the wife and child? They must have known they couldn't be far away. Why hadn't they waited until Oro and his huntfriends had pulled their kill to the hiding place?

The itiji had a thousand songs with stories like Oro's. Oro was a hero of *gliad*—one of the oldest words in the itiji languages. Philosophers had defined it almost as many times as itiji had shouted it at their friends and inserted it in prayers to the gods, but the stories carried all the definition you needed. Look after your kin and your friends. Die for your kin and your friends. *Live* for your kin and your friends.

And Golva always asked the same kind of questions. All the stories had flaws, in his opinion. They had all been arranged—or rearranged—so they told you the same idea.

Why weren't there more stories about itiji who discovered new things? Or thought new thoughts? Why didn't someone make a song about a thinker like Laga Ven Duvo? Shouldn't there be a song about the woman who had first worked out the rules of multiplication?

The tree people hunted the itiji and turned them into slaves because they had *hands*. They could make dartblowers and nets. And sleds that could haul things if you could make someone pull them.

Every itiji knew the story Harold the Human had told. Some of the details had probably changed as it passed around, but the central path could be trusted. The humans had come here from another world—from the places beyond the sky some of the philosophers had argued for. They had seen the towers of the tree people while they were still circling the sky and realized someone already lived on this world. They had landed on the plateau, above the steep cliffs, and made a camp. Harold and some of the other humans had quarreled. There had been fights. Harold and Joanne had left the plateau and ventured into the world below.

Humans had died in the fights on the plateau. Humans could kill. They had powers and weapons stronger than anything the tree people had dreamed of. And they were willing to use them. Amel Detterman had proved that.

"He can understand us," Amel Detterman said. "He can understand every word we're saying."

"I'll try it again," Leza said. "The two people who left here were named Harold Lizer and Joanne Hamilton. Have you heard those names? Do you know those people?"

Amel Detterman was holding the little stick. Two men with guns had taken up positions that gave them a full view of the stall.

"No one is going to harm you," Leza said. "Or them. We're a small group on a strange world. We want to understand the—*people* who live here."

"You've got nothing to lose," Amel Detterman said. "Just give us some information. What are you trying to hide?"

"Did you come here by yourself? Were you supposed to report to someone when you left here?"

The gate swung open. Amel Detterman stepped into the stall with the stick hanging by his side. The two men moved things on their guns.

Leza had covered her mouth with the closed hand humans called a fist. Golva couldn't decipher the emotions on her face but he could see the tension in her body.

What difference did it make when he talked? No one could endure that fire forever.

A huge wail filled the stall—his own voice responding before he even knew the wail was welling up through all the feelings that wracked his mind. He launched himself at Amel Detterman's face with his mouth wide and his front claws poised to strike.

Fire tore through him. A gun roared. Amel Detterman stumbled backward with his arm sheltering his head.

"We have things we can put on that wound. I don't know if you understand the concept of germs. But you should know what happens when wounds get dirty. We can keep that from happening."

He was lying on his side against the back of the stall. They had flamed him until he lost consciousness and tied him to a hook in the wall with a metal leash. The shot had opened a flat ugly hole in his right rear leg. He could still move the leg but he knew she was right. Things would happen to the meat of his leg. They could happen even when you washed a wound.

They had left him alone with Leza again. He could see the pattern. Leza said friendly things and talked like she was trying to protect him. And Amel came and hurt him.

"Can you tell me your name? Can you at least tell me that? You know my name."

Was she only playing a part? Did she have feelings he could speak to? Harold the Human was a fighter but he and Joanne had helped the itiji fight the tree people.

*He likes to hurt*, Leza had said. Did that mean she thought that was something that made Amel different from other humans?

"... Golva."

"Golva? Just Golva?"

"Golva."

"Hello, Golva. My name is Leza. It's a pleasure to meet you."

He stared at her. He had been playing debate games and riddle games since the noises coming from the people around him had first started to make sense. He had always been good at the games that required facts and fast thoughts. And bad at the games that depended on your guesses about the feelings of the other people.

But she couldn't decipher his feelings either, could she? He was just as strange to her as she was to him.

"We call ourselves humans. As a group. Do you have a name for your group?"

"Itiji."

"So you're Golva the itiji?"

"Yes."

"The language we're speaking is called English. We have other languages. Do you have other languages?"

"Yes."

"We have hundreds. Some people say thousands. Do you have that many?"

"I don't know."

"We call our language English because the group of people who started it were called English. The French speak a language called French. The Chinese, a language called Chinese. Do you have groups like that? With their own languages?"

"We have many languages . . . from different places."

Her face changed. The fur over her eyes formed big arches.

"Can you tell me the names of any of those languages? Do they have names?"

The change in her face obviously meant something. He had done something that provoked a reaction. Had he said too much? Had he told her something important?

"What's the name of the language you usually speak?"

He tried to think up an imaginary name and discovered he was staring at a fog. How long had it been since they had let him sleep?

"Telitil."

He actually spoke five languages regularly, depending on what he was doing. Telitil was the least important—the language people used for jokes. The most important, for him, was Vakadu—the language of logical thought and strict analysis of number problems.

"Golva the itiji speaks Telitil."

"Yes."

"And you learned English from the two people who left here, right? From Harold and Joanne? Is that right?"

"Yes."

She lowered her head. Her hands gripped the gate.

He was letting her take the offensive. She spoke, he responded. Was that the best way to play the game?

She had all the advantages. He was tired. His body ached. He knew Amel could retreat with the flame stick.

Clamp your jaws, his mother would have said. Clamp your jaws. And die like Oro.

"They're still alive," he said.

She raised her head. "Thank you."

"Are they your friends?"

"Jo and I . . . yes."

"They are both healthy."

He had to search for the word. He had learned the words and the structure of the language, but he hadn't learned all the things the words could mean, and he had never used them in a conversation with a human. There was probably a word for the way her face had changed and he had probably memorized the word. But he didn't know which word went with that look.

"I have a theory about you," Leza said. "You are obviously a carnivore—a creature who lives by killing and eating other creatures. We have a theory about how life developed on our world. And your world doesn't seem that different. According to our theory, we started out as hunters. We started using simple weapons and the people who were good at making and using weapons—people with big brains—survived better than the people who weren't so good. But it doesn't have to happen that way. Suppose there were hunters who hunted in packs. And called to each other so they could work together. Their calls could develop into real languages. Would that describe what you are? Hunters who've developed language so you can hunt in groups?"

Golva's tail thrashed. The words had poured over him like sheets of blinding rain.

She had worked all that out. From the first three words he had let himself speak. What else could she see?

"Am I right, Golva? Is that what you are?"

"Yes."

"You're hunters. And you obviously have languages."

"Yes."

"But you're here alone."

His teeth ground together. He stared at her and she waited for him to answer.

"Did someone come with you, Golva?"

Should he let her think he had friends lurking near them? Would they treat him better if they thought he had friends?

"I can't tell you."

"Did someone send you?"

"I can't tell you."

"Those cliffs are very steep. Has any member of your species ever climbed them before?"

"I don't know."

"Do you think they have?"

"Some of them might have."

"You have explorers? People who go to new places to see what they're like?"

"Yes."

"How did your head feel? Did it feel strange when you got up here?"

"My head?"

"Did you feel like you were tired? Like you weren't thinking clearly?"

"... at first. Some."

"How long have you been up here?"

Games ended. You could walk away if you got tired. This just went on. One question after another.

It took him a while to realize he couldn't protect himself by saying he didn't know or couldn't tell her. Everything he did told her something. His mother had been right. You started something you couldn't control the first time you let your jaws move.

He could smell his wound but he couldn't see anything crawling on it or flying around it. The building was very clean. The only creatures in it were creatures the humans had brought with them. Harold and Joanne claimed the creatures from their world and the creatures who lived on this world couldn't eat each other. Harold

and Joanne ate animals they had brought with them and plants they grew in their own garden. And a thing they called *cheese fungus* that absorbed leaves and fruits and turned them into food humans could eat.

How would she know his head would feel strange? Did it still feel strange? Was he just hungry and tired?

He knew he was taking a risk when he started lying. He knew he wasn't thinking clearly. But what else could he do? She wouldn't leave him alone. What would he do if she gave up and called Amel back?

"We know your people couldn't have built the towers. You couldn't develop the technology. Is there another intelligent species on this planet, Golva?"

"Yes."

"Do they have hands like us? Do they make tools and weapons?"

"They have hands. They make things."

"Do they go around on two legs like us? So their hands are free?"

"Yes."

That was the first lie. The tree people couldn't walk like the humans. In the trees, they had to use their hands when they scurried along branches or leaped from branch to branch. On the ground, they had to support themselves on their hands and move in a crouch. They could only wield two-handed tools and weapons when they were standing still. They could hold themselves steady with one hand and swing a war hammer with the other but they couldn't fight with a two-handed weapon like the bow Harold carried.

"And what kind of tools and weapons do they use? Are they made out of metal? Or stone?"

"They use iron."

"And what do they call themselves?"

"Imeten."

That was the second lie. In all the languages of the itiji, they were called the tree people. Or the tree demons. The Imeten were the tree people who lived in the city of Imeten. Had she noticed when he hesitated?

"It must be interesting having two intelligent species living in the same area, Golva. You must have interesting conversations."

"We do things for them. They do things for us."

"You trade with them?"

"They help us with their tools. And we know things about the forest—about the things that live there."

"You understand the animals and their ways? And the plants?"

"Yes."

"And they help you hunt? With their weapons?"

"Yes."

It was an idea he had thought about. Harold had led the itiji into a partnership with the Imetens but it was a war union. The itiji were helping the Imetens fight the tree people from the city of Drovil. The Drovils had already conquered three of the tree people cities on the Great River, and wanted the Imeten iron mine.

But why did they have to limit themselves to war? The itiji didn't have weapons and tools, but they knew more. They understood the intricate, endlessly fascinating ways in which the living things in the forest affected each other. They had been studying the world around them for as long as their mouths had been shaping words. And passing their discoveries from generation to generation.

And they had number. The tree people had number, too, but they had just begun to understand it. They might have axes that could lop off branches and heads, but they had never worked out the relationship between the sides of a three-sided fig-

ure. They had never devised the beautiful, cunning procedures that described the way things changed as time pushed forward.

What could you do if you joined the hands of the tree people with the minds of the itiji? *Cut this*, an itiji would say. *Dig there*. And the hands of the tree people and the thoughts of the itiji would create a world that would be just as wonderful as the world the humans came from.

He had tried to describe his vision to his friends and kin and stumbled into the same tangles he usually fell into when he explained his best ideas. His words would come out in a flood, torrents of words tumbling all over each other while his tail thrashed like he was trying to make it blur, and the people he had approached would start drifting away. Or act like they were listening and pester him with responses that proved they hadn't heard half his arguments.

His two oldest uncles had asked him for a full account of his plan and smothered him with objections when he finished. Did he really think the tree people would pay attention to the thoughts of the itiji? The tree people only understood war and weapons and the things they could make with their hands. To the tree people, the itiji were bodies that could understand their orders—bodies they could put to work hauling iron on sleds and pulling on the ropes that hauled water into the trees. The Imetens had only formed an alliance with the itiji because Harold the Human had fought a duel to the death, according to the customs of their city, and convinced the Imetens their goddess wanted them to accept the itiji as equals.

Leza listened while he let the words flow, describing the world he had dreamed as if it really existed. Sometimes her head moved up and down. Sometimes the fur over her eyes—her *eyebrows* according to the lexicon stored in his memory—formed arches that were so big the skin on her forehead wrinkled.

"So you and these tree people cooperate? You have a single society?"

"We work together. And we both benefit."

"What do Harold and Joanne do? How have they fitted in?"

"They're our guests . . . they can do things we and the tree people can't do."

"Did they tell you about us? Did they tell you we're here?"

"Yes."

"Did they tell you why they left here?"

He hesitated. He had felt like he was singing when he had told her his dream. He had almost believed it was true. Now the energy had slipped away. His head felt as heavy as a rock.

"Harold said he wanted to explore the forest."

Her eye fur moved again. She rested against the gate and stared at the floor.

She pulled a flat thing out of her clothes and moved her finger across it. "Can you see this?"

He had paid special attention to the words associated with number and logic when he had learned her language. The three-sided figure she had drawn on the flat thing was called a triangle. The figures projecting from each side were called squares.

"I can see it."

"Do you know what it means?"

"The square on the slanted side—on the diagonal—is the same size as the other two squares added together."

"So you aren't lying about that. You really have developed the kind of intellectual tools the kind of society you're talking about should have developed."

"We don't have hands like you do. We can't make things. But we can think just as well as you. And the tree people."

"And you can probably remember things better than we can. I suspect you could store whole libraries in your head if you lived long enough."

"Can you tell me what it means when you move your head up and down like you just did?"

She stared at him. His skin cringed. Had he made a mistake? Would she call Amel Detterman back?

"Can you tell me why your tail moved so much when you were telling me about your relations with the Imetens?"

"My tail moves a lot when I talk . . . some of us are like that."

"But it moved a lot more then. You talked faster, too. You gave me the feeling you were more excited."

And why should he become excited if he was describing something that had become a normal aspect of life? Was that what she was suggesting?

"We don't have different intelligent species," Leza said. "But we have humans with different attitudes—different cultures and languages. Don't you and the Imetens sometimes have disagreements? Conflicts?"

She had made a mistake. She might be playing against an opponent who was hungry and frightened, but she could still make mistakes—and he could still spot them when they scurried out of the mist.

She hadn't waited for him to say something. She had told him what she was thinking—what she expected to hear.

"We have disagreements. But we manage to settle them."

"When I nod—when I move my head like this—sometimes it means I agree with you. And sometimes it just means I'm listening."

She opened her mouth, with the ends turned upward. "And this is called a smile. Sometimes it means I'm being friendly. And sometimes it means I think something is funny. Like I may think it's funny that I didn't really help you that much when I told you what a nod means."

Leza was standing in front of the gate with Amel Detterman behind her. They had fed him once since she had left him alone but his stomach still felt tense. They had fed the Earth creatures in the other stalls at least twice but he knew he had drifted into a haze. The spheres in the ceiling never stopped glowing. There was no way he could judge the push of time by the trek from day to night.

Amel pushed the gate open. He stopped a long leap from Golva's claws—further than the reach of the metal leash.

"You and these Imetens have a nice arrangement. You get along just like you were all one big happy family. Is that right?"

"Yes. We have disagreements but—"

"But you work them out. And you all work together for the common good."

Amel had pulled the flame stick out of his clothes. Leza had stepped through the open gate. Her hands had curled into tight little balls.

"You knew our rifles were weapons. You'd seen something like them. And I don't think you were too surprised when this hit you. You might have been surprised by the thing itself. But were you surprised somebody would do that to you? Was that a surprise, Mr. Golva? What are you running away from?"

"I came here to see what you had up here. I wanted to see if the stories were true."

"All by yourself? Nobody else on your whole world wanted to take a look? The wonderful brotherhood of itiji and Imetens couldn't organize a delegation and welcome a third intelligent species to your great peaceful union?"

"It's a long climb. I wanted to be first."

"You wanted an adventure," Leza said.

Amel waved the stick at Leza. "Be quiet, Leza."

"I wanted to see," Golva said. "I wanted to climb up here and see it myself."

"You already know what this thing feels like. How do you think it will feel if I apply a jolt to that wound?"

"Amel—"

Amel swung around. His balled up left hand stabbed at Leza's mouth.

Leza's arm moved. The edge of her right hand struck at Amel's wrist. The bottom of her right foot slammed into his body.

Amel staggered back. Leza had moved so fast Golva wasn't sure he had seen everything she had done. It seemed to him she had somehow raised her knee up to her chest and pushed her foot straight at Amel's stomach.

The fire stick leaped out. Leza gasped and Amel pressed the button again and put her on the floor. He rested the tip on her neck and she curled into a ball and screamed.

He stood over her with the flame stick poised for another attack. "You should have thought that through, Leza. I still control the guns. You may know a lot of fancy moves but I still control the guns."

Amel backed through the gate. "I'll let you and your pet think for awhile. Make sure you're still here when I get back."

"Are you his slave?" Golva said.

Leza had struggled across the floor and rested her back against the wall. Her body should have regained its strength if she reacted to the stick the way he did. It was the memory that stayed with you.

"You understand that word?" Leza said.

Her response caught him by surprise. He had added the word to his English vocabulary without thinking about its significance. All the words for slave in the itiji languages came from tree people languages. The itiji had never had a word for it. You couldn't control other people like that if you couldn't make swords and dartblowers.

The humans had a word for it. So the humans must have the thing itself.

"Would you like to leave here, Doctor Leza?"

"And go to that wonderful place you described?"

"Your friends are there. You could live with them."

"And take you with me, right? I can just drag you along. Or do you think you can walk on three legs?"

"It hurts. But I think I can walk. I haven't broken any bones."

"And how do we get down the cliff?"

"You have hands. Isn't there anything you can do?"

"And what will I do when I get there? Live in a hut? Die of some strange disease? Become a *slave*?"

Golva stared at the floor. Was this a trap? Had they shammed a quarrel so he would trust her and tell her the truth?

Amel had deliberately touched her on her bare skin the third time he had flamed her. Her face had changed color when she writhed on the floor. The blow she had delivered with her foot had looked like it could have killed most of the small animals he had eaten.

"It isn't like I said. Not yet. But you wouldn't be a slave. You'd be someone important. Like your friends."

"Why did you come here, Golva? Who sent you?"

"I came by myself. To see. I was telling the truth when I said that."

"How long did it take you to learn our language?"

Numbers floated through his mind. He had learned their number system but he still had to think before he made the conversion.

"Two hundred and twenty-three days."

"You learned it from Jo and Harold?"

"From people who've learned it. We have languages like it—thing acts on thing."

"And other languages that are different?"

"Yes."

"He's going to ask me what you've said when he comes back, Golva."

"And you'll have to tell him."

"Yes."

"If you're still here."

"And what happens if I go running around in the woods with Jo and Harold and damage one of my more important body parts?"

"Would you rather stay here and let him do that again?"

Someday he would know what all her gestures and facial changes meant. He was compiling a catalog, just as he had compiled a catalog for his own people, when he had realized he had to decipher their feelings. But now he just had the catalog. He still didn't know what it meant when she moved her shoulders and made two little humps beside her neck.

"I'll tell you the truth. We have two talking species, just like I said. But the other species is called the tree people. The Imetens are just one city of the tree people—the tree people who live in the city of Imeten. The tree people have hands like you. But they can't walk like you on the ground. They have tools and weapons and they capture itiji and make them slaves. Harold made weapons for us—weapons we can use. He helped us fight the Imetens. He made the Imetens believe their goddess wants us to be their equals. Now we're helping the Imetens fight another city that's trying to conquer them—a city that's already conquered three other cities."

She stared at him. Her eyebrows acquired a compressed look. As if she was forcing them down.

"You claim Harold and Jo did all that?"

"I'm telling you the truth. You can join us. I can call for help as soon as we reach the bottom of the cliff."

Her head moved up and down. "Harold put up a terrible fight when Amel and his gang took over. I can't see him running around in the woods fighting wars, but I never thought he'd fight the way he did then either."

"Amel is coming back. He'll flame me again. He could flame you."

"Can't you tell him the truth? What difference will it make?"

"I don't know what it will do. I don't know what he'll do if he knows the truth."

She covered her face with her hands. As if she was trying to hide from what she could see.

"Are you trying to hide?" Golva said.

"I'm trying to think. Do your people always ask questions like that?"

"I'm trying to understand what you feel."

"It's something we do when we're trying to think. Sometimes. I guess I am blocking out the world. You'd do it too if somebody threw this much at you all at once."

"I don't have hands."

She lowered her hands. "Are all your people so logical?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Are you typical? Are you unusual? I need to understand you, too."

"People act like I'm unusual. I think other people are more emotional."

"And you came here by yourself. But now you're hiding the truth from Amel because you're afraid he'll use it to harm your people?"

"Yes."

She pulled her knees closer to her chest. He watched her push herself up the wall until she was standing erect.

"I don't know what he'll do," Leza said. "But you're probably right. The less he knows, the better."

She had him stand up before she did anything. He showed her he could hobble. She crouched beside him and looked at the wound.

"I don't know what's going to happen with that," Leza said. "Some of the shot should probably be removed. I can put a clean cover over it when we get a chance. But I can't tell you much more."

Her hands freed him from the collar in seconds. "If I don't come back—what you do will be up to you. But try to wait. Give me time. Have you got some way of measuring time?"

"I can count my heartbeats."

"You're willing to lie there and do that?"

"Yes."

She held the flat thing in front of her eyes and rested her hand on the side of his neck. "Hold still . . . we'll call it forty beats per minute. Not bad. Count to two thousand. Give me at least that much."

He counted out the first two hundred beats by ones. Then he switched to threes for the second two hundred. Squares helped him get through the third. *One. Four. Nine. Sixteen. Twenty-five.*

For the last two hundred he counted backward to zero by the number system Taja Av Ralo had invented when he tried to develop a set of rules that would describe the exact shape of a laroo bush in full flower. His heartbeat speeded up as he approached the end so he counted upward for an extra two hundred. With his eyes squeezed closed.

She had untwisted the metal that held the gate closed. He could pull the gate open with his teeth anytime he wanted to. But what would he do then? She had left the main door unlocked but he would have to struggle to get it open. And limp, exhausted, into a landscape crowded with dangers.

Footsteps thumped down the floor. He opened his eyes and saw Amel and one of his gun shooters standing in front of the gate.

The shooter jerked his head around. He turned toward the main door and raised his gun. The big noise battered on the walls.

The shooter stumbled backward as he jerked a movable part on his gun. Something strange shot past the gate—a slab, like a gray sled, with a seat near the front where Leza was crouching over a set of colored lights.

Golva rose to his feet. Amel had pushed open the gate and backed into the stall. He glanced at Golva and stepped out of the stall with his flame stick pointed at the slab.

Golva lurched across the stall on three legs. The slab had looked like a sled but it didn't seem to be sliding across the floor; it seemed to him he hadn't seen anything except air between the slab and the floor. . . .

He couldn't get his teeth around Amel's leg but he could grip the muscle in the back of the lower leg, just like he would grip the muscle of a velagar, and bear down through the thick clothes that covered it. He couldn't taste the blood and the skin but he could shake his head back and forth and make the two legged *hurter* fight for his balance. And feel some of the pain the human's ugly mind liked to create.

Fire raged through Golva's body—as he had known it probably would. His legs folded at the first surge. He held on, fighting to keep Amel distracted as long as possible, until the pain made his jaws spasm open.

Figures moved in the haze above him. He raised his head and saw Leza kicking

and pummeling. Amel had doubled over and fallen back but this time she didn't stop hammering him. The flame stick fell out of Amel's hand and she kicked him until he was huddling on the floor with his hands clutching his stomach.

She picked up the flame stick. "Can you get on the sled, Golva? Can you pull yourself up?"

Golva stared at the slab. The sleds the tree people used dragged along the ground. The carts Harold and Joanne had given the Imetens rolled along on wooden wheels. The vehicles he had seen when he had watched the settlement had moved by themselves, with humans sitting on them the way Leza had sat on this thing, but they had rested on wheels, too.

He forced himself up. Leza was aiming the flame stick at Amel. The gun shooter was sprawled across the floor in front of the sled. His gun was lying on the sled, in the long flat space behind the seat.

"I can get most of me on it. If you could give me a push."

They rode out of the barn into full daylight. The slant of the shadows indicated the day had reached its last third. Golva was lying on his side, with the wounded leg exposed to the air, but he could raise his head and estimate he could spot over two hundred and thirty humans scattered among the buildings and fields.

"I'm not going to hurt anyone," Leza said. "I'm just taking Golva back to his own kind. He can't give you any more information. You'll just kill him—torture him and kill him—if you keep this up."

"You're going to come back here?" a voice said. "You're going to drop him off in the woods and rejoin our happy family?"

The voice didn't sound like it was yelling from a distance. The other human was talking like he was sitting right beside her. But Golva couldn't tell where the human was located.

"I'm going to return him to his own kind. They seem to be a very communal species. I shouldn't have any trouble finding someone who will take care of him."

"That's not good enough, Leza."

"You'll get the sled back, if that's what you're worried about."

The sled had turned to the left, toward the river that marked the edge of the territory the humans had transformed. Golva counted heartbeats as they raced along the side of a building and decided they were moving twelve to thirteen times faster than his average walking speed, assuming the building measured about thirty-two paces end to end. Four times faster than his best running speed.

He searched his memory for the human time units. "We will reach the edge of the cliffs in six eighths of one of your hours."

"Very good, Golva. I had a feeling you might come up with that kind of calculation."

"Where is the voice coming from?"

She jabbed her finger at the structure with the colored lights. "Can you see what I'm pointing at? This round thing?"

"Yes."

"It's called a loudspeaker. We have . . . tools . . . that let us speak over long distances. The sound comes out of there."

"Why doesn't this sled slide on the ground?"

"Can I answer that later? Can you watch our back? I've got . . . devices . . . that let me see what's behind us, but there's no substitute for an extra pair of eyes."

He lifted his head and squirmed until he could twist it to one side and view their rear. The pain from the wound had become a dull, continuous ache.

They were skimming above the surface of the river, downstream, toward the cliffs. They had left the human fields behind and started racing through the grasses and

sparse, low trees that covered most of the plateau. Bushes and leafy trees formed a thick mass along the banks. Clouds of tasty looking flyers leaped into the air as they passed.

Sunlight flashed on metal. He squinted into the distance and decided he was looking at another example of the thing he was riding on.

"There's another sled following us, Leza. It's about eight hundred meters behind us."

"I've got them. Keep me informed."

"Why do you need my information if you can see them?"

"I'm looking at a lot of things. I need all the help you can give me."

"They're moving faster than we are. They're getting closer."

"I'm speeding up. Brace yourself."

The sled shot forward. He felt himself start to slide across the surface and pressed his front paws against the smooth metal.

"Are they still closing?"

"Yes."

"Hold on."

He forced his paws into the metal and watched the trees and bushes race past. Wind flowed across his side—a strange, steady wind, hard and unwavering.

A voice spoke through the loudspeaker. "Have you figured out what you're going to do when you hit the falls, Leza? You're looking at a very long drop."

Golva felt a change in the wind and realized they had slowed down. The other sled was creeping closer. "They're gaining on us, Leza."

"Can you tell me when they're . . . make it thirty meters closer? Can you judge our measuring units that closely?"

"I think so."

"This thing eats up energy. I have to make sure I've got something in reserve when we reach the edge."

*Energy. Energetic.* He had words that matched the English words. You lost energy when you were tired. Or sick. When you went without food.

"Does the sled eat?"

Leza barked. He jerked his head around and saw her shoulders quiver.

"I'm sorry, Golva."

"For that response? What did that sound mean?"

"A laugh. Amusement. Are you watching our pursuers?"

His tail twitched. He looked back and realized he had let his attention drift away from something that could end all his attempts to understand the world.

"They're about forty meters closer."

"Brace yourself."

The sled leaped forward. The other sled stopped gaining but it was now forty meters closer and they obviously couldn't widen the gap. How far could those guns shoot?

"I wasn't being unfriendly," Leza said. "Sometimes . . . when people are different . . . the differences can seem funny to them. Does that happen with your languages? Do your people laugh?"

"We have responses like that."

"The sled doesn't eat. But the . . . stuff . . . that makes it go is like food. I only have so much. And I use up more when we go fast. I want to have all I can when we reach the edge. So we don't fall too fast."

"And they know that? They're going as fast as they can to make you use energy?"

"That's exactly the situation. You think fast."

"What happens if you don't have enough energy when we reach the cliffs?"

"You climbed up here. Can you climb down? With your wound?"

"I don't know."

"Are there ledges? Are there places where it slopes?"

"There are gullies. There are places where things grow. But you have to get between those places. Sometimes I didn't think I could do it. Sometimes I had to press against the rock and creep along a tiny ledge."

"You must be very brave."

His tail thumped against the sled. Memories blocked out the scene around him. "Sometimes I *had* to go forward . . . I couldn't go back."

"Can we get to itiji who can help you if we get below?"

"I don't know the people who live in this area. But I can call for help."

"You call for help? And somebody comes?"

"They come or they pass on the call."

"And you think somebody will be close enough?"

"I can't tell you. I don't know how many people live in the area around the cliffs. There are factors that indicate it may not be a good hunting region. But I can't give you a number."

They slowed down twice more. The second time she let the other sled gain over sixty meters before she speeded up.

The banks had gotten higher. He could see roots sticking out of the soil below the trees. The water had acquired flecks of white.

"How far can those guns . . . propel?"

"We've been in range since they started chasing us. But they'll have to get a lot closer before they can be sure they'll hit us. Can you hear the waterfall yet?"

He moved his head from side to side. "Yes."

"I thought you might. Do heights bother you? Did it bother you when you looked down when you climbed the cliff?"

"Sometimes. I sometimes felt uncomfortable."

"This will feel strange. Can you wiggle around this way? So you can hold the back of the seat?"

"I can hold it with my back paw. The leg that isn't wounded."

Leza barked again. "I should have thought of that. Just stay low."

Water frothed around rocks. Steep, rugged banks rose above the river. The falls roared ahead of them.

Golva jammed his paw behind a rod that supported the back of Leza's seat. He rested his head on the warm metal floor of the sled and concentrated on the scene behind them—on the hazards they had already skimmed. He didn't realize they had crossed the edge of the cliff until he saw the dark front of the waterfall drifting past as they sank downward.

"Just hold on," Leza yelled. "I'm taking us down as slow as I can. We aren't going to crash."

They were falling. They were definitely falling. He could feel it in his stomach.

"Can you look up, Golva? Are they following us?"

He raised his head. Looking up made it worse but he managed to do it.

"I don't . . . see . . . them."

"Keep a watch. Let me know."

Mist from the waterfall seeped into his skin. They weren't falling as fast as the water. But they were gaining speed. He could see they were gaining speed.

Sunlight flashed above him, on his left. He twisted his neck around and saw the other sled floating in front of the waterfall. A human looked over the side.

"They're here, Leza. They've started falling. I think they're falling faster than we are."

Leza shouted something he didn't understand. He turned his head and discovered she was staring at the other sled as if she was getting ready to bite it, mouth half open, lips curled over teeth.

"I didn't understand you."

"It was another language. My mother's. Never mind. Hold on."

He closed his eyes as soon as he realized they were falling faster than the water. And opened them before his heart thumped twice. Blocking out the world made it worse. He could feel every response churning through his body.

*"Tell me where they are, Golva. Keep talking. I need your help."*

Orange light flashed on the other sled. He couldn't hear the noise above the roar of the waterfall but he knew he was looking at the end of the gun.

"Three hundred meters high. Two hundred meters on my left. They're shooting at us."

He knew what to do. He couldn't force English words into the arches and rhythms of a hunting song but he knew what he had to do. Tell your huntfriends what you see. Tell your huntfriends what you do. Listen. Act. Forget your fears. *Tell.*

"Hold on," Leza said. "Bumpy ride ahead."

The bottom of the sled pressed against him. The gun flamed again.

"They're shooting again," Golva said. "Two shots."

*"Keep it up, you sons of bitches. Waste your ammo."*

His stomach lurched again. He jerked back his head and howled in surprise. "Tell me what you're doing, Leza. Tell me everything you do."

"You've got a great voice, Golva. You should learn Italian."

"They're falling faster. Getting closer. *Tell me what you're doing.*"

"I have to keep slowing. So we don't gain too much speed."

"We go faster as we fall. I understand."

"I'm not surprised. I'm trying to time the braking so it throws off their aim. Are they shooting?"

The sled gained speed as it fell—as everything did. The *energy* slowed them down but they still gained speed. So she added extra energy now and then and canceled some of the gain. And reduced her supply of energy every time she did it.

"I see someone pointing," Golva said. "I see someone aiming."

"Hold on."

The gun flashed. The front of the sled clanged. Leza shouted two hard syllables in her mother's language.

The sled dropped. He slipped toward the side, caught by surprise, and fought to hold his position.

*"Are you all right, Leza?"*

"I'm getting us out of this. Hold on."

The gap between the two sleds widened. The gun flashed again. They weren't falling freely but he could see the steady increase in speed when he glanced at the rocks beside the waterfall.

"I'm going to land on the water, as close to the edge as I can get. Do you know how deep that river is?"

"I didn't come up this way."

They were moving forward, away from the falls. The other sled was so far above them he could ignore it.

The sled pressed against him. "Brace yourself, Golva. We're hitting hard. I'm giving it all the juice I've got but we're hitting hard."

Treetops glinted in the sun. Trunks and branches flashed past.

The sled crashed into the river. Walls of brown water rose around him. A huge, flat blow slammed into the whole length of his body.

The sled tilted to the left. He felt himself sliding and managed to keep his rear paw hooked around the seat support. Mist and pain floated between him and the world.

The sled righted itself and he realized they were moving forward. "Are you still there, Golva?"

Her voice sounded thin and quavery.

"I'm here, Leza."

"I'm steering us into the trees. As far as I can get us. Can you call for help?"

"I'll try. Soon."

The energy left in the sled lifted them over the tangle that grew beside the river. The dimness of the forest enveloped them before they had traveled eight human meters. The big trees, as always, had blocked the light that fed their weaker rivals and created wide domains for their branches. Leza had to keep veering right and left, as if she was working her way through a maze, but the sled could slide between the trees as if it was drifting down a river of air.

"We're running low, Golva. Are you going to yell or aren't you?"

He raised his head. His ear hurt. The cries of the birds still sounded like they were falling from trees that were taller than the cliffs.

The Plea of the Traveler was one of the oldest songs every itiji knew—a survivor from a language that hadn't been used for ordinary talk since the oldest trees in the forest started their climb toward the light.

*"Hear me now! Hear the stranger in your land. Hear the plea of the traveler. Help me now, if you can. As I and my friends and kin would help you."*

He didn't try to describe the humans and their weapons. He told them where he was. He told them he was wounded and pursued. He would have to give them a proper warning if anyone responded but he didn't have to put all the details in the first call.

The sled settled to the ground. "End of the road, Golva. Can you still walk?"

He struggled up. He had to support himself on all four legs for a moment but he could bear the pain in his wounded leg.

He worked his way off the sled. He could still see the sunlight glinting on a patch of the river.

He raised his head and repeated his plea. He turned his head from side to side when he finished, searching for an answer.

"You should go," Leza said.

She had stood up but she hadn't stepped off the sled. She was clutching the back of the seat with both hands.

"Are you all right, Leza?"

"A shot. Hit my head. I think it bounced off something."

"Can you walk?"

"I'll be all right. We should separate."

"Separate?"

"I got you out. Get away before they come."

"I don't understand."

Her left shoulder hunched upward. "I have this thing. In my arm. They can tell where I am."

He stared at her. "We all have it," Leza said. "So people can find us if we wander off. They'll have a thing on the sled they can use to follow me."

Was there any end to it? Sleds that floated on air. Tools that carried voices over long distances. Harold came from this?

She picked up the gun she had taken from the human she had run down in the barn. "I'll lead them away from you. We can get together later."

"You'll be alone."

"So will you."

"This is where I live."

She picked her way off the sled. She stood still for a moment and he watched her while she stared at the ground. "I'm not going to argue with you. Get away. Get safe."

She turned around and started walking into the forest, along the line they had been traveling. She held the gun by its front end and let it drag across the ground beside her.

Golva limped after her. "Do Harold and Joanne have those things in their arms?"

"We all have them."

"Why didn't you know where they were?"

"The—things—only work over short distances. A few kilometers. *Get away*. Don't you understand? They'll kill you. After they torture you."

"And what if they catch you?"

"They won't kill me. They may get rough, but they won't kill me."

"I don't understand *get rough*."

"Violent. Painful. Get away, Golva. They'll be here before you know it."

He angled away from her. "Yell now and then, Leza. Tell me where you are."

He had stared calculating the best angle while he was taking his first step. He had to place himself on a path that balanced three conflicting conditions: it must maximize the distance between him and the river; it must put him so far from Leza their pursuers couldn't see him when they caught up with her; *and* he had to stay inside a moving circle, centered on Leza, that would keep him in hobbling distance of her position. It was a basic problem in Tactics Theory, with all the usual complexities created by factors like the sight lines in the forest, the rise and fall of the terrain, and the curves in the river.

He had been working problems like that since he had started playing hunt games with his friends. It was the primary skill he could offer a huntband—the only one, according to his least-favorite uncle.

He threw out another call as he took his twelfth step. This time he added an inducement—an addendum that would have made him respond if he had heard it from someone else.

"I have things to tell. I have climbed the cliffs. I have seen the creatures who live there. I can tell you things no one has seen before."

He waited. His ears sorted through the sounds of the forest. Something was moving through the trees. From the river. Along the line Leza had been following when he had left her. At the speed the humans in the other sled would travel once they entered the forest. He could follow its progress through the steady advance of the squawks and shrieks that chattered in the branches above their heads. The tree people and the itiji were the only true talkers, but other creatures made sounds that carried simple messages to their own kind. Messages you could use if you understood them.

A voice broke through the clamor. "Your message has been heard, stranger. No one has climbed the cliffs. The cliffs cannot be climbed."

"I have climbed them. I have seen the humans who live there. I have come from Imeten. From the warfriends who fight with Harold the Human. I am wounded. A human has helped me. Other humans pursue us. We need your help. Help me! Hear the pleas of the traveler! As I and my friends and kin would hear you!"

Another voice reached him from the same direction as the first. How many hu-

mans were there? Why were they pursuing him? What kind of weapons did they have?

Golva lowered his head. His tail stiffened. "I can't tell you everything now. *I need help now. The human who helped me needs help now.*"

"We want to help you, traveler. We know our obligations. Please tell us more. That's all we ask."

Every time he tried to work with people they pelted him with some kind of confused silliness. Did they really think he could explain everything he had learned while he was limping through the forest hiding from his pursuers? First things first. They had to get him and Leza to safety. *Then* they could lie down in peace and discuss the things he had learned. Couldn't they see that? Wasn't that obvious?

"We have a message from Bogdavi the Dreamer. He is running to your aid. What do you want him to do?"

Golva raised his head and listened to the trees. The humans had moved past him. He had to keep moving.

"Tell Bogdavi to come as fast as he can. Tell him to make all the noise he can. Don't let the humans see him. But make all the noise he can."

"We will tell him. Is that all you want? Just noise?"

"Yes. Make all the noise you can. Let them know you're here. Tell me if you see them."

*We are running. We are running as if all our meals depended on it. You will be hearing Bogdavi with your own ears before your heart has pulsed a hundred times. Do the humans carry weapons? Do they walk on two legs with their hands free like Harold and Joanne? Do Harold and Joanne really walk like that?*

There were only two of them but they were doing what he asked. They were singing as if they were competing with the thunder. Would the humans realize they were only exchanging information, as they did when they hunted? How would all this sound to minds that came from a different world? And possessed the powers the humans controlled?

"Spread out," Golva sang. "Make them feel they are threatened from every direction."

He could still follow the movements of the humans by the responses of the tree creatures. Most of the living things in the forest had adapted to the ways of the itiji. For most of them, the songs of the itiji were just a part of the general background. The human sled would be a novelty. A cause for alarm.

He was responding to the questions as he pushed forward. They were all singing continuously, but his species had been masters of the art of listening while you talked since they had first learned you could shape sounds into messages that would put food in your mouth.

He was answering a question about the creatures in the human barn when he realized the tumult in the trees had faded. He listened while he described the face of the creature called a *hog* and broke off his essay just before he reached the ear flaps.

"The humans have stopped advancing! I am moving closer to Leza! Silently! Maintain the song!"

"Can you see them?"

"Have they stopped because of us?"

"I am dropping into silence."

He heard the humans shouting before he saw them. Their voices would never match the power of an itiji in full tongue but they could muster a respectable surge when they were excited. Amel was doing all the talking. He seemed to be yelling at Leza.

Golva would have slithered forward on his stomach if he hadn't been wounded. On

three legs, he had to stay upright. And hope the shadows and the sight lines would protect him.

He stopped as soon as he got his first glimpse of the humans. He leaned against the side of a tree and wiggled into a position that blended his outline with the bulk of the trunk.

Amel and another man were sitting in their sled. The second man had his gun aimed in the direction Amel was gesturing.

"You're being stupid, Leza. What are they going to do? Pull you to Harold's Utopia with their teeth?"

He heard Leza say something, but he couldn't make out the words. He turned his head—slowly, *movement attracts eyes*—and picked out a gesture and part of Leza's face. She was huddled at the base of a tree, sheltered by an oversized root.

"You've gone as far as you can," Amel said. "Tell us which way your cat friend went and we'll get you home. Don't be stupid. He's crippled. And we've got all the ammo we need."

Bogdavi the Dreamer had added his voice to the chorus. "What are you doing? Have you learned anything?"

He had learned his little ruse probably hadn't worked, judging by the way the humans were acting. Should he tell Bogdavi he had learned all their noise making hadn't had any noticeable effect? The two humans on the sled seemed to think they could pursue Leza without worrying about the threat from a bunch of unarmed cats.

The sled started creeping toward Leza. The second man raised his gun to his shoulder and aimed it as they advanced.

"You haven't done anything we can't forgive," Amel said. "Tell us which way he went and we'll put you on the sled. You'll be upstairs fifteen minutes after we round him up."

Leza's gun banged. The trees erupted in shrieks and flutters. The second male stood up in his seat with his gun trained. Amel jumped off the sled and ran toward Leza.

Three voices sang questions.

"What's happening?"

"What was that noise?"

"Was that one of their guns?"

Amel turned away from the tree with Leza's gun in his hands. He handed the gun to the other man and marched back to the tree. Leza let out a weak scream and Amel yanked her away from the tree and sent her staggering across the ground with her arms flailing.

"Which way did he go, Leza?"

Leza sank to one knee. Amel stepped up to her and hit the side of her face with the inside of his open hand—a slap.

"Which way did he go?"

Golva slithered behind the tree. "The human who aided me has been captured. She seems confused. She received a blow on the head. From a pellet. From a gun."

Bogdavi the Dreamer had drawn closer. "Can you come to her aid? Can you hold them until Bogdavi arrives?"

"I am walking on three legs. Pellets wounded my right hind leg."

"Bogdavi is coming. The Dreamer is running to you. What can you do?"

"They have weapons, Bogdavi. Their guns throw pellets like the dartblowers of the tree people throw darts. They throw them farther. And faster."

"Bogdavi is coming. The Dreamer is coming."

Golva eased his head around the tree. Leza was still lying on the ground. The two men were looking his way.

They knew someone was singing near them. Did they know how close he was? Did they realize it was him?

Leza had told him to escape. She *wanted* him to escape.

"Bogdavi is coming. Bogdavi the Dreamer has heard your song. *Gliad. Gliad.*"

"The dreamer is chasing a dream," one of the other itiji sang. "The dreamer is immersed in his dream."

"*This is the song every child must learn. Sing it with fervor. It is the song of gratitude.*"

Bogdavi had slipped, seamlessly, into the first words of the newest epic in the itiji repertoire, the song that told how *two strange creatures came out of the north walking on two legs. . . . Every wondering mind that saw them looked at the thing they were pulling and knew, instantly, without doubt, that they could make tools and weapons no creature who could speak had ever seen. . . . And this was the gift of the gods: that they were brave and could act, and were wise and could foresee. . . .*

Bogdavi the Dreamer had extended gliad to a human female he had never met. Did he see her as a woman of his own species, reclining between the roots of a valla tree while he wooed her with songs and promises? Did they call him the Dreamer because he had swallowed all the stories they had fed him? And created a vision that was pulling him toward a danger he didn't understand?

Golva limped away from the tree with his body as close to the ground as he could get it, along an arc that carried him toward Bogdavi and maintained the maximum distance between him and the sled. He counted off sixteen strides and switched to English.

"We're coming, Leza! The trees are full of rescuers. We're coming to your aid."

He knew he couldn't outrun them. He let out one final call to Bogdavi and hobbled toward a tangle of vines and shrubbery that had accumulated around a fallen tree. Something squawked as he burrowed into the vegetation and he automatically lashed out and crushed a hairy body before it could rake his skin with its hard, poisonous tongue.

The noise in the trees advised him the humans were moving again—straight toward the place where he had called to Leza. He had counted off forty-three steps before he settled into his hiding place. The area they had to search would be, at minimum, a semi-circle with a radius equal to that many steps, given unknowns like the direction he had chosen and the speed he could move. If you took into account the length of the average sightline before it was interrupted by a tree and the difficulty of determining exactly where he had been when they heard him . . .

Bogdavi was still coming. He even seemed to be moving in the right direction. The other two itiji had spread out in the hope that would make it sound like there were more of them.

"I told you to get away," Leza shouted. "I need medical help. I have to go—"

"Bogdavi will attack in silence. Try to distract them. I will advise you before I assault."

Bogdavi could locate the humans as well as Golva could. They were over on his left now—about fifty steps. Leza's outcry had given him an accurate estimate. He had hoped they might leave her lying on the ground but they had obviously put her on the sled.

*Be still. Be part of the world. Be a shadow.*

It was an old discipline. Learned as a child. Lie still. Let your huntfriends drive your dinner toward you.

The sled moved toward him, then veered away. They turned again, retracing some of the same territory, and he realized they hadn't settled into a systematic search pattern. He had already worked out an optimum pattern, idly, as a natural response

to the situation. Didn't they know what to do? Didn't their machines imply a widespread understanding of numbers and their laws?

He had learned the rules of number because others had thought them up. He hadn't discovered them himself. Half his friends and kin wandered the forest without the slightest interest in most of the things he thought about. Should he assume the humans were any different?

It was an interesting idea. There were number rules for the way ideas moved among kin and between kin groups. He had never examined them but he knew they existed. Could the rules that applied to the itiji be applied to a species as different as the humans? Had anyone tried to apply them to the tree people?

"Bogdavi will assault in ten beats. Give me a distraction if you can."

The call jolted him out of his reverie as if he had been struck with the flame stick. The sled had crossed his front to his right. He could catch glimpses of it as it slid across the sight lines broken by the trees.

Bogdavi's call had reached him from a point on his left. Bogdavi hadn't told him what direction he would attack from but he could only run so far in ten beats. And Bogdavi's heart would be beating faster as he ran.

Golva stood up. He limped into the open, where he had a clear view of the sled, and threw back his head.

"We're here, Leza! Lie down! Protect yourself!"

It took them a moment to react. The sled turned and Golva pressed himself against the ground and gave Bogdavi a running description, with the best guide to his position he could piece together.

The sled floated toward him at a walking pace. Amel stood up and held his gun with the muzzle pointed toward the treetops. He was scanning the ground between the tree trunks as if he felt there was, after all, some possibility Golva was telling the truth and he might have to fend off an assault.

Bogdavi might be a dreamer but he knew how to keep quiet. Golva didn't realize he was there until a blur caught his eye just before Bogdavi jumped onto the sled.

"Get the gun!" Golva sang. *"Attack the man standing up."*

Bogdavi had already reached the same conclusion. Amel turned toward the howling thing that had landed behind him and Bogdavi leaped at his hands. Teeth closed around the first forearm he could reach.

Golva limped toward the sled. Human males outweighed typical adult itiji by at least two eighths, in his estimate, but Bogdavi was holding on in spite of Amel's struggles.

The man shifted his grip on the gun. He raised it above his shoulder with the butt poised to smash into Bogdavi's head.

"Attack his face!" Golva yelled. "Kill him!"

Bogdavi saw the danger and released his grip before the blow fell. Angry jaws leaped at Amel's gun hand. Teeth ground on naked flesh.

Amel screamed. The gun slipped out of his grip. He punched at Bogdavi with his free hand and Bogdavi held on.

The other man had stopped the sled. He twisted around in his seat and Golva realized he was reaching for the gun.

A voice raised a howl. A dark figure emerged from the trees—a small slender itiji who looked like he was at least a year younger than Golva.

The sled was still three slow steps away. The driver turned toward the newcomer and the young itiji rose up on his hind legs and howled again. The driver pulled the gun away from the struggling bodies behind him and the itiji raced at the sled in full voice and veered away before the driver's hands could scramble into position on his weapon.

It would have been nice if the newcomer had actually joined the battle, but it was good enough. Golva had hauled himself onto the front of the sled while the driver was distracted by the mock attack. He stretched out his right front leg. His claws ripped at the side of the human's head.

Cheek tore under his claws. Half the human's face disappeared under a sheet of blood. The man's eyes widened. The gun clattered on the sled. Golva had been killing animals since he had been a child but he had never seen the open mouthed, contorted image his jaws were poised to destroy.

Some of the animals had squealed in pain. But they never looked like that. They weren't fully aware, the philosophers argued. They avoided pain but they didn't know they were mortal. They didn't know they were going to die.

"Run! Run and I'll let you live."

The human groped for a handhold. He stumbled to the ground and doubled over with his hand clutching his mangled cheek.

Amel was still punching Bogdavi's head. Leza had risen to her knees.

Golva rested his paws on Amel's shoulders and pulled himself up. His voice broke into the hunting song. "I'm putting my weight on him. I'm bearing him down."

Bogdavi released Amel's hand and rested on the human from the front. They pressed down on the struggling figure as if they were forcing a meal to the ground.

"Don't kill him," Leza said.

She had stretched across the deck and grabbed the gun. She pointed it in their direction and Golva eyed her over Amel's thrashing body.

"She has the gun, Bogdavi. Let him go."

Bogdavi eased off. Amel sat up and Leza aimed the gun at his chest.

"Get off the sled, Amel. Keep your hands away from your pockets. I'm not going to shoot this thing if I can help it. But I will."

"You'll never get back upstairs. You'll die out here."

"Get off the sled."

Amel eyed the two itiji. He was breathing hard. His hand was covered with blood.

Leza kept the gun trained on the two men until they had retreated a good hundred meters. Then she laid the gun on the deck and eased herself into the driver's seat.

They ran out of energy just after the thickening darkness under the trees merged with the true night.

"Do you gentlemen take some kind of shelter at night?" Leza asked.

"You'll be safe," Golva said. "Most of the things that might attack you have learned to leave us alone."

Leza moved her shoulders. "I was thinking of comfort. I've got some food in my pockets. Enough for a couple of days. Can you take care of yourselves?"

"Yes."

She looked around her. "At least it's not cold."

"Are you going to stay with us, Leza?"

"And go to this Imeten place?"

"Yes."

"I've injured myself, Golva. I took a blow in the head from a ricochet—from a bouncing bullet. We hit hard when we hit the river. You were lying down. I was sitting up. It may not be as bad as it feels. But we've got things we can do for it. On the plateau. Things I don't think you have."

"They'll kill you if you go back."

"After what you did to Alec's face?"

"He was trying to kill Bogdavi."

"You didn't kill him. I saw that."

Her shoulders moved again. "They aren't the only people there. They've got a lot of power right now, but they can't run wild. And I'm a woman. I have a certain value just for being a woman."

"The Imetens have boats. We can send a message ahead. You don't have to walk all the way."

"What are you saying?" Bogdavi said. "I think I have a right to know."

Golva gave him a quick summary. Leza peered at them, obviously trying to study their faces, and he realized he should have told her what he was doing.

"I'm just telling him what we're saying," Golva said. "I couldn't have rescued you without him."

"I didn't ask you to rescue me. I told you to keep going."

"They were hitting you. They could have kept on hitting you."

"I could have survived. Now—with the way they've been hurt . . ."

"The other humans live in Imeten," Bogdavi said. "Can't they give her what she needs?"

"Bogdavi says your friends have survived in Imeten."

"They've been lucky. If Harold's done all the fighting you say he has, he could have died if he'd just let one wound go bad."

"He cleans his wounds. He washes every day."

Leza pointed at Golva's leg. "We should get that washed. You could lose that leg if we don't take care of it."

"You thought about all these things you're talking about before you went to get the sled. You say you want to leave the plateau. Then you tell me all the reasons why you think you can't. You attack them. You help me escape. Then you tell me I shouldn't help you."

Her eyebrows formed arches. "I'm not being logical. Is that what you're saying?"

"Yes."

"Think of my feelings as being like two forces. One pushes one way. One pulls me the other. Can you think like that?"

"Of course. But what would the numbers be?"

Leza twisted around in the seat and put her feet on the ground. She pushed herself erect and Golva waited while she steadied herself against the side of the seat.

"Let me see what kind of supplies they've got on this thing. Could Bogdavi help me carry things? If we arranged some kind of a pack?"

"She wants to know if you can carry things for her," Golva said. "With a container slung over your back?"

"The way the tree people make their slaves do it?"

"Yes."

"Would you do it?"

"If my leg wasn't wounded? I may carry something anyway."

"Then tell her I will," Bogdavi said. "Tell her Bogdavi the Dreamer says he will bear whatever she wants. Wherever she wants."

"He says I should tell you Bogdavi the Dreamer will bear whatever you want. Wherever you want."

Leza's mouth curved. "Well. That's very . . . touching."

"Shall I tell him you said that?"

Leza bent forward. Her hand swept across an arc. "Please tell Bogdavi the Dreamer that Dr. Leza Montarelli Sanvil is most honored by his gallant offer. Please tell him I think he is a most brave and honorable gentleman, and I am grateful for all his assistance. And accept his generosity and kindness with more gratitude than I can possibly express. Can you translate that?"

"We have words for that," Golva said. ○

**One Author, One Editor,  
Several Heroes, and Millennia  
of Future History**

Sometimes, in certain lights, it seems obvious to me that the only proper mode of science fiction is the future history: a long extensive franchise, formed variously of novels and stories, in which vast forces and patterns can be arrayed, as well as microcosmic incidents examined, employing a large cast of characters with events fitting allusively into a recomplicated continuity. To name such mega-constructions is to create an honor roll of SF achievements. Cordwainer Smith's *Instrumentality*. Asimov's *Foundation*. Niven's *Known Space*. Banks's *Culture*. Dickson's *Child Cycle*. Baxter's *Xeelee*. Heinlein's *Future History*. Smith's *Lensman*. Herbert's *Dune*. Lucas's *Star Wars*. The list of such big-tapestry fictional universes could go on and on.

Of course, focus on this one particular style and method of story-telling omits many other kinds of stefnal greatness and potential, in favor of a certain type of "wide-screen baroque," to employ Brian Aldiss's phrase. But there does seem to be some kind of core-and-essence-of-the-genre feeling about these narratives-arrayed-across-a-coherent-future-timeline.

Due to marketplace considerations and the vagaries of a writer's career and inspirations and abilities, such future histories are often written willy-nilly and assembled in comprehensive fashion retroactively, only fully appreciated after the writer's death has brought a stop to their development. (Although as we have seen with the *Dune* books by Kevin Anderson and Brian Herbert, even mortality does not necessarily halt a profitable and beloved future history.) One such posthumous instance has recently culminated with the assemblage of the *Technic Civilization Saga* by Poul Anderson into seven volumes from Baen

Books, according to its internal chronology rather than dates of publication.

This magnificent and valuable undertaking owes its existence primarily to editor Hank Davis, who has collated all the stories (with the help of scholar Sandra Meisel's researches) into their proper reading order. His assiduous labors allow us to properly appreciate Anderson's thirty-years' labor (the first tale in the saga appeared in 1951, the last in 1985, and neither item bookends the current incarnation), which spans the years 2055 to 7100 AD.

*The Van Rijn Method* (mass-market paperback, \$7.99, 656 pages, ISBN 978-1439133262) opens with "The Saturn Game," recounting an incident from the early days of exploration within our native Solar System, and seems a tad anomalous, given the broad scope of what's to come. But by the second entry, "Wings of Victory," we're out in a galactic setting, off and running as humans encounter the winged Ythrians. The fourth story, "Margin of Profit," introduces our first main protagonist, trader Nicholas van Rijn. Soon we have also picked up other famous personages from the series: David Falkayn ("The Three-Cornered Wheel") and dragon-like sophont Adzel ("How to Be Ethnic in One Easy Lesson"). Lots of van Rijn adventures follow, including a complete novel, *The Man Who Counts*, which finds a castaway van Rijn teaching natives how to wage war solely so that the stranded humans can be rescued.

It's indicative of the haphazard way that such future histories develop that the Polesotechnic League, main engine of the early parts of the series, is already long-established off-stage when "Wings of Victory" opens. Any writer sitting down to outline the creation of their history programmatically would surely have included an "origin story" of the League, whereas the organic evolution of the series

skipped right over the conception stages of this plot-driving polity.

*The Van Rijn Method* offers a definite flavor of brawling, free-for-all youthful vigor, with fresh first-time encounters between humans and aliens predominating

Our next volume, *David Falkayn: Space Trader* (mass-market paperback, \$7.99, 704 pages, ISBN 978-1439133446), offers us a chance to comment on Anderson's liberality and generosity regarding the female point of view. He always crafted strong and sympathetically presented women, even if they occasionally hewed to what some might regard as old-fashioned attitudes and roles. Generally, though, they were tough fighters and thinkers, equal to the males. The Technic Civilization Saga is replete with such characters. "Territory," our first story here, opens from the perspective of a woman explorer, albeit one who gets her bacon saved by van Rijn. And of course, "The Trouble Twisters" introduces us to the fabled team of Falkayn, Adzel, Muddlehead (an AI), and feline Chee Lan, herself one of the series's most vibrant "sophonts" (a word coined by Poul's wife Karen).

What strikes me upon my re-reading of these tales, many of which I encountered as a teen, is how frontier-oriented they are. There is no equivalent to Asimov's focus on Trantor, say, the heart of the star-leaping civilization. All the action that Anderson is interested in exists on the fringes of civilization, in line with the Polesotechnic League's desire for more and more new markets and resources. Anderson's heroes favor the saddle over the hearthside, often literally!

Certainly this focus also stems from the unique nature of the galactic civilization. No emperors or nobility or bureaucrats. As we learn again in this volume's central novel, *Satan's World*, the Polesotechnic League is "an association of interstellar merchants. It's more powerful than any single government. It organizes cooperative, mutual-benefit activities, and it mediates competition." In fact, the League territories are really all periphery, prophetically resembling the internet: distributed nodes, workaround for

damage (the persistent space pirates and barbarians), information supreme. . . . Anderson's future looks more probable to me every day—if not necessarily wholly desirable—and is a refreshing change from space operas featuring ancient forms of government writ large.

Readers get their first major continuity frisson here, with "Day of Burning," where Falkayn and company save the planet Merseia from extinction. Centuries later, that world will be a thorn in the side of our heroes. Editor Davis helpfully alerts us to such thrills in his introductions, but sensitized readers will compile their own catalogs. I smiled to see an allusion to Anderson's non-Technic novel *The High Crusade* (1960) in "A Little Knowledge," where there is speculation about non-technological barbarians riding automatic starships (a problem that will in modified form actually come to bedevil this civilization).

The pertinent tone of this volume is one of a slight overripeness: a civilization functioning at the peak of its power, yet unaware that they are hitting the limits of their own growth and sustainability.

*Rise of the Terran Empire* (mass-market paperback, \$7.99, 688 pages, ISBN 978-1439134245) confirms this diagnosis. The opener is the novel *Mirkheim*, in which Falkayn is married and retired, his boon compatriots scattered. Realpolitik dilemmas reunite him with Adzel and Chee Lan for a final adventure, whose outcome portends a troublesome future for the League. Both the personal and cultural passage of time and the onset of unwelcome but inevitable changes are palpable here. This volume marks a sea change in Anderson's future history.

And it should be mentioned, in passing, though it almost goes without saying, that Anderson's prose and story-telling abilities are top-notch throughout. His famous appeal to every sensory input, his bardic poetry and his sharp ability to pace action scenes are givens. It's true, however, that some repetitiveness does creep in, over the three decades of scattershot composition. Chee Lan's cigarette holder is always described as being of "interminable length," for instance.

But just as James Bond, to satisfy his audience, must always specify that his martinis be blended in a certain fashion, so too do these touchstones provide comfort to readers.

It's fitting that the two items that chronicle the nadir of civilization, before the revival of the Terran Empire ("The Star Plunderer" and "Sargasso of Lost Starships"), were published in *Planet Stories* and bear all the rude pulp hallmarks of that venue. Any series of this length should be able to accommodate different styles and modes.

Our third volume closes with another novel, *The People of the Wind*, set during the start of the Empire's senility. It's a stirring wartime encounter on the planet Avalon, a mixed-species colony established by Falkayn. Your continuity frisson for this novel is a meeting between a member of Falkayn's bloodline, Tabitha Falkayn, and one of Dominic Flandry's progenitors. Besides illustrating the tensions inherent in the Terran Empire, this volume sets us up for Flandry's adventures as he strives to stave off the "Long Night" in the next three volumes.

*Young Flandry* (trade paperback, \$13.00, 544 pages, ISBN 978-1439133279) is a first for this compilation, boasting no short fiction. It's an omnibus of three novels: *Ensign Flandry*, *A Circus of Hells*, and *The Rebel Worlds*.

The first one finds our nascent James Bond—a comparison many have made, although Anderson also had Simon Templar, the Saint, as an inspiration—aged nineteen and in need of some naïveté-dispelling, which he is about to receive at the hands of both his fellow Terrans and Merseian enemies, during contention for the planet Starkad. Anderson does not even introduce Flandry till Chapter 4, a move indicative of his always-present concern with the larger plot picture and historical framework, and with establishing a good retinue of supporting characters as foil for the hero. By book's end, Flandry has passed through disillusionment to renewed vigor in the cause of staving off entropy.

*A Circus of Hells* provides a pleasant change of pace, finding Flandry (now a

lieutenant) playing more or less a solo hand, hieing off with a beautiful call girl (of surprising talents) named Djana to a lost moon run by a loopy autofactory before being captured by Merseians. We see Anderson's fairness at work, in this description of the enemy: "They had homes and kin the same as people . . . they had arts, melodies, sports, games, jokes, minor vices. They didn't want war with Terra, they only saw the Empire as a bloated sick monstrosity which had long outlived its usefulness but with senile cunning contrived to hinder and threaten them."

*The Rebel Worlds* is notable for its focus on intra-human rivalries (frontier worlds try to toss off imperial reins); for another strong female character, Kathryn McCormac, wife of the rebel Admiral; and for a return to Satan, the rogue planet discovered way back in Polesotechnic times.

These three novels provoke a host of observations. First, it would be of interest to compare them to a resonant concurrent series, Laumer's Retief adventures. I suspect that the Laumer tales would emerge by comparison as even more lightweight and silly—though still admittedly fun and well done—than they look alone. Second, the Cold War ambiance reflected in these books stands out more than ever, post-1989. Much of the subtext in the Flandry series involves cruel opponents who dishonor democracy and individualism: the standard Commie portrayal. It's subtle and balanced, but present. Third comes the sense that sometimes our own worst enemies are ourselves, with corrupt and nihilistic Terrans providing a picture of rot from within. Lastly, we must affirm how much of a debt subsequent work in this vein owes to Anderson. Everything from the *Star Trek* franchise to C.J. Cherryh's ongoing *Foreigner* series reflects a huge conceptual debt to Anderson.

*Captain Flandry* (trade paperback, \$13.00, 432 pages, ISBN 978-1439133330) opens with a non-Flandry novella, "Outpost of Empire," which chronicles the triumph of the natives of Freehold over the Terrans. Known as a standout Campbellian stablemate, with this outing from *Galaxy* magazine Anderson proved he

did not necessarily subscribe to all of Campbell's crotchets about human superiority. Minus Flandry likewise, *The Day of their Return* is still the big novel here, as it sequelizes *The Rebel Worlds*, riffs nicely on the notion of a fake religion as a strategy of conquest, and also introduces the sly and brilliant alien who is to become Flandry's *bête noire*, the avian Aychraych.

Concerning leitmotifs: Anderson had an essential passage that he reworked and inserted in almost every tale at this point, about how big and unknowable the Terran Empire was to the human mind, and yet how paltry a portion of creation it represented. Encountering this passage over and over has an incantatory, hypnotic effect—at least on this reader—casting a certain deliciously melancholy Götterdämmerung shadow over all the action, just as Anderson intended. And as we witness the roller-coaster ride on which his civilization is embarked, the message becomes paramount, although of course we still enjoy the foregrounded action. A curious thing is that this twilight aura hovers over even the earliest stories, from 1951—a period when Anderson was all of twenty-five years old! How he came to feel—or even simulate—such world-weariness so young is a psychological matter to ponder.

When Flandry and Aychraych finally meet, in "Honorable Enemies," it's a wonderful confrontation, full of verbal, mental, and literal swordplay.

The operative affect for this volume and its predecessor is one of Flandry as a master juggler in his prime, able to keep dozens of plates spinning successfully, with glee, yet aware of the inevitable crash.

*Sir Dominic Flandry's* (trade paperback, \$13.00, 448 pages, ISBN 978-1439134016) first novella, "The Plague of Masters," allows us to raise the issue of Anderson's forward-looking multiculturalism. His galaxy is far from Anglos-only. The previous volume featured planets colonized by Africans and Mongolian/Asiatics, while this tale is centered on a Malay-derived world. A veteran reader might recall L. Sprague de Camp's Brazil-

ian-inspired future as another example of this kind of early genre attention to non-dominant, non-Western cultures, and in fact Anderson namechecks de Camp at one point in this opus. It becomes apparent that the roots of Ian McDonald's recent multicultural novels go back deep in our field, and to surprising strata.

So long as I'm citing other SF writers as influences, I should toss out the name of Jack Vance. Anderson and Vance were personal friends, and I'm sure they admired each other's work. While Anderson never reaches the exotic summits of Vance's human and alien cultures, there are still traces of that impulse to depict the galactic culture as a rococco spectacle, especially in Flandry's colorful clothing.

Anderson closes out this volume with a novel that pulls out all the stops: *A Knight of Ghosts and Shadows*. An aging Flandry experiences betrayal by kin, the death of a beloved, and a final albeit unsatisfying confrontation with his nemesis Aychraych.

*Flandry's Legacy* (trade paperback, \$13.00, 480 pages, ISBN 978-1439134276) is a bipartite closing volume. The first half of this big book (and I should at this ultimate point mention that readers are receiving tremendous value for their hard-earned dollars with these generous compilations) consists of two novels wherein we say goodbye to Flandry and his era. The first is *A Stone in Heaven*, and finds our aging and ennobled hero helping Miriam Abrams, the daughter of his first mentor, Max Abrams, with the plight of some indigenes facing an ice age. This is followed by *The Game of Empire*, focused on a now-married Flandry and his illegitimate daughter Diana, who works in the field with a team that recalls Adzel and Chee Lan from Falkayn's heyday. Appearing in 1985, this novel is prefaced by a 1994 foreword from Anderson in which he says he will write no more of the Technic civilization. This interval of nine years between final Technic output and declared end of storytelling might go a long way toward explaining the less-than-vaedictory way that *Game* ends. The book is very satisfying on the solo level, but as the last

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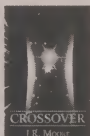
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glimpse of Flandry and the Empire, it just chops off too abruptly and without the eulogistic gravitas we might have expected. Once again, an aesthetic decision dictated by the marketplace and the unforeseeable exigencies of a writer's life.

The last part of this series takes place in Flandry's dreaded Long Night and beyond. Amidst the wreckage, weird cultures are explored in Sturgesesque fashion: *The Night Face* and "The Sharing of the Flesh." Finally, "Starfog" ties all the way back to *The Rebel Worlds*, three millennia prior, in an era when mankind is again on the rise.

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What can we take from this series, beyond hours of pleasurable reading? In these uncertain years of the early twenty-first century—not far from the projected start of Anderson's saga—when civilization teeters and humanity's very existence looks problematic, the long view embodied by the series comforts and inspires, in a clear-eyed, rational fashion. Conditions change, for better or ill; our fortunes rise and fall; but life and culture persist. Anderson echoes an old proverb: "Even though the world is ending, if you have a seed in your hand you should plant it." ○

# SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Too much news to cover Easter now. Next time (but note the correct weekend for MarCon is Easter). Picks for the coming month are COSine, CapriCon, Boskone (where I'll be), ConDFW, MystiCon, and Potlatch. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business envelope] at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con five months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard. —Erwin S. Strauss

## JANUARY 2012

27-29—COSine. For info, write: 1245 Allegheny Dr., Colorado Springs CO 80919. Or phone: (973) 242-5999 (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). (Web) [firstfridayfandom.org](http://firstfridayfandom.org). (E-mail) [cosine@rialto.org](mailto:cosine@rialto.org). Con will be held in: Colorado Springs CO (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Crowne Plaza. Guests will include: Charlie Stross. Rising new con, largely by exiles from Washington DC.

27-29—ConFlikt. [conflikt.org](http://conflikt.org). Seattle WA. Bill and Brenda Sutton, Brooke Lunderville, Riverfolk. SF and fantasy folksinging.

27-29—Creation. Contact as below. Airport Marriott, Burbank CA. Creations are commercial media events; many actors present.

## FEBRUARY 2012

4—Dickens Bicentennial Ball. [peers.org](http://peers.org). Alameda CA. Victorian theme period dance party. 200th anniversary of Dickens' birth.

9-12—CapriCon, 126 E. Wing #244, Arlington Heights IL 60004. [capricon.org](http://capricon.org). Westin, Wheeling (Chicago) IL. Doctorow, MacLaine.

17-19—Boskone, Box 809, Framingham MA 01701. (617) 625-2311. [boskone.org](http://boskone.org). Westin Waterfront, Boston MA. Scalzi, Weisskopf.

17-19—ConDFW, 750 S. Main #14, Keller TX 76248. [condfw.org](http://condfw.org). Dallas TX. Cherie Priest, William Stout. SF, fantasy, horror.

17-19—FarPoint, 11708 Troy Ct., Waldorf MD 20601. [farpointcon.com](http://farpointcon.com). Timonium (Baltimore) MD. Michael Hogan, Kate Vernon.

17-19—Katsucon, c/o Box 3354, Crofton MD 21114. [katsucon.org](http://katsucon.org). National Harbor MD (near DC). Stan Sakai, Greg Ayres. Anime.

18-19—Creation. Contact as below. Airport Marriott, Burbank CA. Creations are commercial media events; many actors present.

24-26—MystiCon, 3735 Franklin Rd. SW #228, Roanoke VA 24014. [mysticon-va.com](http://mysticon-va.com). Sherrilyn Kenyon, Nikki Clyne, U. Vernon.

24-26—Potlatch, Box 3400, Berkeley CA 94703. [potlatch-sf.org](http://potlatch-sf.org). Best Western Executive Inn, Seattle WA. Written SF and fantasy.

24-26—ConCave, 124 Fairlawn Ave., Lexington KY 40505. [concaveky.org](http://concaveky.org). Bowling Green KY. Mark Linneman. Low-key relaxacon.

25-26—Satellite, Box 3738, Glasgow G41 4WD, UK. [satellite3.org.uk](http://satellite3.org.uk). Grand Central Hotel. Charles Stross.

## MARCH 2012

2-4—ConDor, Box 15771, San Diego CA 92175. [condorcon.org](http://condorcon.org). Town & Country. L. Cunningham, M. Bocianowski. Men in Black, etc.

2-4—StellarCon, Box F4, EUC, UNCG, Greensboro NC 27413. [stellarcon.org](http://stellarcon.org). High Point NC. Rothfuss, Mark Poole, the Fulbrights.

2-4—ECOF. [edgarriecburroughs.com](http://edgarriecburroughs.com). Tarzana CA. The centennial of the creator of Tarzan of the Jungle and John Carter of Mars.

2-4—Creation. Contact as below. Airport Marriott, Burbank CA. Creations are commercial media events; many actors present.

9-11—KatCon, De Rogge 6, Heesch 5384 XD, Netherlands. [beneluxcon.nl](http://beneluxcon.nl). Hotel Noordzee, Katwijk. G. Jones, Jan J. B. Kuipers.

10-11—Creation, 217 S. Kenwood, Glendale CA 91202. [creationent.com](http://creationent.com). Sheraton Imperial. Raleigh, NC. See description above.

16-18—LunaCon, Box 432, Bronx NY 10465. [lunacon.org](http://lunacon.org). Rye Brook NY. John Ringo, Howard Tayler, T. Pierce, A. & K. Looney.

16-18—RevelCon, Box 6924, Houston TX 77265. [severalunlimited.com](http://severalunlimited.com). "The Little Con with the Texas Size Heart." Ages 16 up.

16-18—FantaSciCon, 395 Stancil Rd., Rossville GA 30741. [fantascicon.com](http://fantascicon.com). Howard Johnson Plaza, Chattanooga TN.

16-18—RadCon, Box 370, 1761 George Washington Way, Richland WA 99354. [shawn-pack@yahoo.com](mailto:shawn-pack@yahoo.com). Red Lion, Pasco WA.

16-18—OmniCon, Box 5624, Cookeville TN 38505. [omnicon.us](http://omnicon.us). Tennessee Tech University, Cookeville TN. Multi-genre. Much gaming.

16-18—Anime ConJL. [animeconjl.org](http://animeconjl.org). Town & Country Resort, San Diego CA. Anime and manga. This year's theme: "Matsuri."

23-25—MidSouthCon, Box 17724, Memphis TN 38187. [midsouthcon.org](http://midsouthcon.org). Hilton. M. Stackpole, S. C. Gilberts, E. Siegel, J. Corroney.

## AUGUST 2012

30-Sep. 3—Chicon 7, Box 13, Skokie IL 60076. [chlcon.org](http://chlcon.org). Chicago IL. Resnick, Morrill, Musgrave, Scalzi. WorldCon. \$195+.

## AUGUST 2013

29-Sep. 2—Lone Star Con 3, Box 27277, Austin TX 78755. [lonestarcon3.org](http://lonestarcon3.org). San Antonio TX. The World SF Convention. \$160.

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